

PLAY AT THE TURN OF THE MILLENNIUM:  
REFRAMING SOUTH ASIAN DIASPORIC ART (1980s–PRESENT)

A Dissertation  
Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School  
of Cornell University  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

by  
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December 2017

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Cornell University 2017

*Play at the Turn of the Millennium* develops a theory of play around aesthetic forms such as camp, parody, and caricature that re-remembers art in the age of identity. This dissertation historicizes a moment of political emergence in South Asian diasporic art (in North America and the UK) that coincides with the postcolonial in the art world. In a rush to inaugurate a confrontation to the canon, art criticism focused on historically marginalized content – an urgent and overdue intervention that shifted traditional approaches in art history, but one that came at the expense of a formal analysis of what the artists were doing in the work – their aesthetic labor. Furthermore, where aesthetics were emphasized, recurring themes include nostalgia, collective solidarity, and opposition have dominated the framing of contemporary art from South Asia and its diaspora. Through formal analysis, archival research, historical contextualization, and interviews this project uncovers an under-examined set of subversively playful aesthetics across multiple South Asian diasporas. I argue for play as a transformative aesthetic that not only counters regimes that regulate visibility but that renders them absurd. Fostering a transnational gaze in art history at the intersection of area studies, diaspora studies, and gender and sexuality, this dissertation shows how attention to playful aesthetics during this period exposes how mainstream conceptions of diversity and multiculturalism police what cultural difference should look like.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Natasha Bissonauth has a Bachelor's degree from McGill University (2005) and a Master's from the Courtauld Institute of Art – University of London (2006). Prior to doctoral studies, she worked in the commercial art gallery scene and arts non-profit sector in New York City, focusing on modern and contemporary South Asian art. Her research centers on queer and feminist art making situated in contemporary global visual cultures with an emphasis on South Asian and South Asian transnational circuits of art. Broader organizing principles include interdisciplinarity, critical race theory, empire studies, media studies, affect theory, visual literacy, and pedagogy. In 2016, she won the Biddy Martin Prize for LGBT Research. Bissonauth has participated in over fifteen academic conferences and has organized several over the past ten years as well. She has published artist interviews, exhibition reviews, and profile pieces in publications such as *Art Asia Pacific*, *Art India*, *Art & Deal*, *C Magazine*, *Exposure*, and *SAMAR*. Peer-reviewed articles include “Zanele Muholi’s Affective Appeal to Act” (*Photography & Culture*, 2014) and “Sunil Gupta’s *Sun City*: An Exercise in Camping Orientalism” (*Art* forthcoming in *Art Journal*). She is currently a pre-doctoral fellow at Ithaca College in the Art History department.

To Mauritius, to my parents -  
the first to leave, the first to let me go...

&

To Dawn

For lessons on risk

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

On December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2013, my father turned sixty years old and my family in Montreal hosted a huge gathering on his behalf. In the middle of my doctoral studies, I made the trip home for the special occasion. The next semester I was to begin fieldwork; although my time in London feels like eons ago now, somehow memories from my dad's celebratory night are more vivid to me. Perhaps because he began the evening with a familiar story, one I grew up hearing, and would come to know well over the years: the first migration narrative I would come to know, his own. As he stood up to greet his guests and thank them for coming, he remarked upon all of the familiar faces that surrounded him. "And as an immigrant," he continued, "community matters." In 1975, when he first arrived to Canada he found himself to be quite alone. There were not that many Mauritians yet and there certainly was not any family around; he is the first-born and the first member of his family to leave Mauritius and he did so before he married. Thus, he and his new friends in Montreal would come to recreate family bonds between themselves and many of these community members were present for his evening of festivities. Needless to say, the room was also filled with biological family members too; of the over twenty-five relatives present in the room, many had decided to emigrate to Canada in large part because of he was already t/here.

Queer diaspora scholars like Gayatri Gopinath have unpacked the ways "home" can be a troubling site for many diasporic queers who seek refuge from a racist host nation while simultaneously longing to be seen and accepted for the ways (despite the ways) we desire; this certainly rings true for me after coming out to my family and community. It was an explosive conversation and my dad and I never spoke of it again.

Needless to say, my partner did not join me for his birthday festivities. My father's immigrant journey and his reservations, shame, and disappointment in me are not uncommon, nor are my struggles with him. Yet despite the unresolved antagonism between us, we have still attempted, in our stubborn ways, to come around to each other; sometimes there is solace, though mostly we fail. He does not have the words to imagine that which has been rendered utterly impossible for him while I do not have the patience to confirm the dignity of my queer desire and existence to him. But in the stickiness that has been us, we have persisted nonetheless and we continue to persist.

I have produced a dissertation that encompasses many narratives but is, at its core, a diasporic one. As the first migrants whose stories I came to know, my parents are inevitably implicated in my project. Their DIY ethic has inspired me to do-it-myself, my way as well – albeit with unexpected returns, at least from their perspectives. Perhaps it is because of this failure to “come around,” this unresolved tension between different kinds of diasporas (straight/queer) that ultimately feeds my project, that allows me to, no, that forces me to find other ways to lean into the incommensurate, impossible, and unimaginable.

Of course to my committee Iftikhar Dadi, Sara Warner, and Cheryl Finley thank you for all the years, the guidance, and for holding me accountable to my word – both rhetorically and the literal ones on the page. Iftikhar, as an artist, curator, and academic scholar I have learned a lot about navigating the contemporary art world as a postcolonial subject. Your courses on South Asian art and comparative modernities have been invaluable lesson plans and I indebted to your advice on my writing and scholarship. Also, your work is incredibly playful and I hope to write about it. Sara, I first gravitated

towards affect in your seminar ‘Passionate Politics’ and have yet to disentangle myself from its pull. I am immensely grateful to you for this! Your advice over the years has been extremely concrete and practical. Through your guidance, I have also been able to imagine my scholarship outside the discipline of art history, thereby better articulating its interdisciplinary impact. Cheryl, I have learned so much from our independent studies on queer black photography and another on diasporic art and theory. I gave some of my first guest lectures at Cornell through your courses and I thank you for the invitation and responsibility, which allowed me to hone my public speaking skills in a classroom setting. Gayatri Gopinath, more than an external reader, you have been an advocate and mentor long before I began my doctoral studies. From informal meetings to letters of support to the federal government for work visas, you have always made me feel as though I have a contribution worth investigating and it is this kind of support from within the academy (a rare outlet for queer folks of color) that motivated me to apply to graduate school. Thank you!

At Cornell’s History of Art and Visual Studies department, there are a handful of folks I must thank. Keeley Boerman, thank you for making this whole experience feel more human. As the department’s informal counselor you labored in ways that went well beyond your job description and I am deeply grateful. As DGS, Claudia Lazzaro and, prior to, Maria Fernandes, restructured expectations to graduation; I am grateful for their guidance and for making it through! I have also taken seminars with Maria and TA-ed for Claudia, and have, as a result, learned from their pedagogical styles. The History of Art and Visual Studies department has also supported my professional development, often supplementing financial support received by the Graduate School for conference travel;

thank you. The Society of the Humanities has also supported my research in the form of funds.

I am grateful for the friendships I have retained from graduate school at the Courtauld Institute of Art, in particular, those with Jeannine Tang, Joe Madura, Vesna Krstich, and Nikolas Drosos. These friends and colleagues helped me through the application process and our reunions at CAA remind me of how some things never change.

I remember first arriving at Cornell in 2010 and, having been working in New York City and developing a community of friends mostly from the South Asian queer community there, Ithaca felt very isolating. I could not have properly dealt with these feelings if it was not for you, Derica Shields, Armando Garcia, and Bradley Pecore. Our conversations and ways of supporting each other mostly revolved around navigating prestige and how to ‘fake it ‘til you make it,’ especially as first generationers; these conversations have been invaluable to me and certainly alleviated what was otherwise an alienating experience on multiple levels. Although it may often feel otherwise, I have been reminded many times that we are, in fact, not alone in this process.

In summer 2011, I traveled to India for the first time in my life. With the intention of researching queer activism and art making, folks such as Gautam Bhan, Mario de Penha, Rushaan Kumar, Shalini Krishan, Anokhi Parikh, Georgina Maddox, Sunil Gupta Charan Singh, Radhika Singh, Akshaya Tankha alongside side members of the Nigah Collective were incredibly forthcoming with their knowledge. Thank you to Reecha Upadhyay and Ayesha Sood for housing me!

When I went to London in spring 2014, Renee Mussai was a guiding light. Thank you for introducing me to Zanele Muholi's work, an introduction that ultimately led to my first academic publication, which is dedicated to her photographs. Sunil Gupta, thank you for the countless interviews you conducted with me (both in London and New Delhi). Archives like those at Autograph, IniVA, and the African-Caribbean, Asian and African Art in Britain Archive have been indispensable to my project.

To my peers in the History of Art department, especially, Brinda Kumar and Pamela Corey during my A-exams, who were key pillars of support; to Vicki Ehrlich, Polly Nordstand, Amanda Gilvin, Liz Emrich, Kristen Strehle, Natalia Di Pietrantonio, Yuhua Ding, Icha Rahadi, Hannah Ryan, Asli Menevse, Kaitlin Emmanuel, Lara Fresko and to other friends and colleagues at Cornell like Aurora Masum-Javed, Alana Staiti, Natalie Nesvaderani, Liz Blake, and Xine Yao, thank you for your affirming advice, for sharing materials, reading over my work, offering constructive feedback, challenging me with your inquisitiveness, sharing space and working together – and for those much needed nightcaps! Thank you especially to members of the Rainy Day Writer's Group, some of my most compelling pages were written with you!

During my last year, I was a pre-doctoral fellow at Ithaca College. During my time there I taught 'Modern and Contemporary South Asian Art' in fall 2016 and 'Queer Contemporary Art' that following spring. Needless to say, teaching in a the liberal arts college environment was inspiring and I walk away with many new tools. Thank you in particular to Risham Majeed, Jennifer Germann, and Jennifer Jolly.



A note on the content in my dissertation: I've written seminar papers on and presented conference talks on some material in the dissertation, which undoubtedly helped me rehearse and refine my ideas and objectives. I have written and presented conference papers on the following artists and artworks: Sunil Gupta's *Exiles* (1986) and *Sun City* (2010), Chitra Ganesh's digital animation art like *Tales of Amnesia* (2002), Brendan Fernandes' *Foe* (2008) Sa'dia Rehman's *Lotah Stories* (2005), and Divya Mehra's various work. Over the years, scholars like Svati Shah, Anjali Nath, Bene Ferrao, Jih-Fei Cheng, Josh Franco, Ronak Kapadia, Alpesh Patel, Jane Davidson, Kareem Khubchandani, Anna Malla, Lucinda Ramberg, and Anantha Sudhakar have offered their feedback and I am indebted to their queries for furthering mine.

I end my acknowledgments by contemplating on the dual significance of *utopos* – that good place but also that place that cannot be. This is my elsewhere and it is from this positionality that I write.

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**INTRODUCTION**  
**Play at the Turn of the Millennium:**  
**Reframing South Asian Diasporic Art (1980s–present)**

On more than one occasion Canadian Indian artist Divya Mehra has been chastised for her “bad attitude” toward all things Indian. In 2010, she was especially biting in a new work she made for the South Asian Women’s Creative Collective’s (SAWCC) annual show at the Rotunda Gallery in New York City. As a progressive group active since the 1990s, SAWCC emerged just as the diasporic art community reached a critical mass in North America and began envisioning aesthetic possibilities in collective solidarity. While the SAWCC exhibition aimed for trans-local dialogue, Mehra’s piece bluntly questioned the curatorial mandate. Titled *Contemporary South Asian Art*, her large scale, text-based wall piece read, “I AM INDIAN, SO I’M IN THIS SHOW” in brown block letters. The work calls out how artists of color are often reduced to their identity, especially in mainstream contexts (figure 0.1). Yet, Mehra’s sarcasm also addresses how even exhibitions venues like SAWCC’s, which were initially intended to broaden conversation around identity, diaspora, and aesthetic meaning, have become monotone – similar to how “Indian Tan,” the official name of the brown pigment Mehra uses for her printed lettering, amounts to a single shade of light to even brown. Moreover, by juxtaposing “South Asian” in the title with “Indian” in the wall text, she boldly names an undercurrent of Indian hegemony that is palpable within the South Asian diaspora. Her intertextual playfulness and dry humor imply stagnancy in categories like “diaspora” that collectives such as SAWCC helped to re-imagine, but that now seem stuck in an identitarian loop.

In my final chapter, I elaborate on how Mehra's antagonistic tone demands more accountability and less complicity from her audiences, both mainstream and non-mainstream. Mehra's work exemplifies how my dissertation, *Play at the Turn of the Millennium: Reframing South Asian Diasporic Art (1980s–present)*, re-remembers art in the Age of Identity by emphasizing the aesthetics of play, including intertextual sarcasm, but also parody, camp, and caricature. I mobilize play as an aesthetic response to regimes of visibility (whiteness, misogyny, homophobia) that produce caricatures of minoritarian subjects. Like Mehra, these artistic responses are often outrageous, infuriating, and humorous in form, a spillage that amplifies distortions crystallized in stereotypes. Bearing this in mind, I emphasize play as an aesthetic strategy that has the capacity to rethink models of representation that otherwise escape the conventional rhetoric around identity. In this way, my project invests in the undermining potential of the politics of form.

I begin by historicizing a moment of political emergence in South Asian diasporic art – the 1980s and 1990s in the United Kingdom and North America – a moment that coincides with the “global turn” in the contemporary art world. As artists from the diaspora targeted visual studies for its troubling history of stereotypical and racist imagery, they exposed the white hegemonic structures undergirding art institutions. They developed an aesthetic lens, as an integral part of their emergent practices that was grounded in social justice, postcolonial selfhood, and community belonging. Demanding art world recognition and in a rush to inaugurate a language that animated the visual culture of difference, art criticism focused on previously marginalized communities. This critically urgent and long-overdue intervention within the art establishment irrevocably

shifted traditional approaches to the study of visual culture and theory. Yet, art in the Age of Identity has largely prioritized content-based analysis – what the work is about – at the expense of a formal analysis of what the artists themselves were doing in the work, that is to say, their aesthetic labor. As a result, there has been significant fatigue around “identity” as an organizing principle, which has been accompanied by its facile dismissal.

By focusing on the politics of form, my project questions what Colleen Lye has identified as the “polarization of the ‘ethnic’ and the ‘aesthetic.’”<sup>1</sup> Shifting analysis away from thematic approaches, the impact of diasporic art expands beyond the representation of social formations. Here, Raymond Williams’ conceptualization of form as thoroughly social and historically active is useful. Because “for Williams, form too is a social relationship”<sup>2</sup> – that is to say, a certain study of forms can serve as a specific “point of entry to certain kinds of [social] formations.”<sup>3</sup> Bearing this opening in mind, how might attention to the politics of form, aesthetic playfulness in particular, shift visual approaches to issues of race, migration, but also gender and sexuality that are central to diasporic studies? As an aesthetic strategy within the visual culture of difference, play counters this fatigue around identity and offers an alternative, more capacious approach to understanding the structural forms identity takes on in artworks.<sup>4</sup>

Current documentation on the visual culture of difference has explored the politics of form, for example, an aesthetics of collective solidarity, a nostalgic gaze on cultural origins, and an aesthetics of confrontation imbued with a utopian hope for a

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<sup>1</sup> Colleen Lye, “Racial Form,” *Representations* 104, no. 1 (Fall, 2008), 94.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>3</sup> Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 138.

<sup>4</sup> See Kadji Amin et al., “Queer Form: Aesthetics Race, and the Violences of the Social,” Special Issue, *ASAP/Journal* 2:2 (2017).

browner, more equitable future (see chapter one). This emphasis, although not inherently problematic and in fact quite groundbreaking at first glance, has dominated the discourse and has consequently forestalled a more in-depth formal analysis of the plethora of aesthetic strategies within the visual culture of difference, for example other elements of aesthetic dissent, such as the subversiveness of play. My project uncovers examples of under-examined aesthetic playfulness across South Asian immigrant histories of art making. I argue for play as a transformative counter-aesthetic that negotiates majoritarian regulatory forces by suspending and subverting them. Through formal analysis, archival research, historical contextualization, and interviews with artists, curators, and activists, my research shows how a playful aesthetic was endemic to the era but was de-emphasized as politically ineffective. The stakes were different at the time; the desire to be taken seriously in the fight for recognition by institutions took precedence. But now with some critical and temporal distance, scholarship can stretch and investigate the broader aesthetic breadth of community arts.

I conceive of playful aesthetics such as camp, satire, parody, the carnivalesque and grotesque as a formal device and strategy in art making that offers political commentary; but rather than counter or oppose the status quo in an adversarial – and thus binary – way, play mobilizes ridicule, exaggeration, and inversion as a politically subversive rebuke which aims to undermine and upend power dynamics. Thus, my attention to play makes evident how artists were not only invested in generating visibility but were bypassing an ideology of victimization by also poking fun and calling out absurdities inherent to regimes of visibility. This re-imagining modifies how one encounters art during this time, alongside the work that visual culture does. By shifting



the conversation from visibility projects to others that are embedded in an aesthetics of irreverence, I mark a crucial transition in diasporic art history. I push against inclusionist tendencies that attempt to fill in discrepancies within the art historical canon and interrogate instead what ends up getting “included” in such recuperative projects, why, and how. By emphasizing a politics of form, I shift conventional understandings of South Asian diasporic art post 1980s as not only a moment that was declaring the political efficacy of visualizing difference anew and demanding canonical inclusion on this basis but one that was also challenging *how* difference gets framed and is made legible – thereby modifying the parameters of the art historical canon. Furthermore, by relying on an irreverent aesthetics to do so, attention to play questions accepted ideas around what constitutes aesthetic value and taste, making room for under-valued and tasteless form to make an aesthetic impact.

In addition to fostering a more transnational gaze within art history at the intersection of area studies, diaspora studies, and gender and sexuality, I mobilize play to expose and contest how mainstream conceptions of diversity and multiculturalism police the visual culture of difference. Thus, I contest global art market prescriptions of what cultural difference should look like. The neoliberal packaging of multiculturalism has witnessed the most influential art institutions expand their borders, and yet they continue to impose a short-sighted view of cultural difference, leaving artists not necessarily feeling “included,” but pigeonholed into promoting a distinctly ethnic sensibility; and, critically, one that is viable to market demands. It is this kind of art world tokenism that has led to reviews describing Mehra’s work as “not brown enough,” given her unforgiving tone, and has seen the New York-based artist Chitra Ganesh branded as the

“brown” Lichtenstein, given her comic art’s rhyming love affair with pop culture.<sup>5</sup>

Ganesh’s reception interpolates her practice only in relation to the white mainstream, while obliterating the formal nuances to her practice. In chapter three I elaborate on how her love affair with comics is more complex than a Lichtensteinian citation and functions to incisively rupture, recycle, and re-remember connections to diaspora, desire, and the storytelling form.

My four chapters re-imagine the visual culture of difference by centering the emergence of the South Asian diaspora in contemporary art – and the critical elision of playful aesthetics – as a major case study. I study visual formations stemming from emerging diasporic communities at the turn of the millennium. Thinking through the 1980s, 1990s, and the beginning of the twenty-first century as a punctuated moment in white fragility, my project contextualizes the rise of cultural studies in the academy through to the ruses of colorblindness, and the current global rise of religious fundamentalism and white nationalism. I highlight the work of queer people of color and women of color artists (in the UK, the US, and Canada) who respond to this moment of political hostility by using a formal playfulness, one that gestures towards undermining the power imbalances censoring and curtailing representation. Chapter one traces the emergence of the South Asian diasporic art scenes in London and New York City during the 1980s and 1990s and offers a new mode of analysis, given how accompanying scholarship has precluded a serious consideration of playful aesthetics. Chapter two investigates Sunil Gupta’s photography since the 1980s, first as an incisive commentary

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<sup>5</sup> Mary Thomas, “Comic-Book Style Brings Home ‘Word of God(ess)’ Exhibition to the Warhol,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, August 17, 2011, <http://www.post-gazette.com/ae/art-architecture/2011/08/17/Comic-book-style-brings-home-Word-of-God-ess-exhibition-to-the-Warhol/stories/201108170228>

on the colonial forces that censor queer Afro-Asian lives in London, and second as a simultaneous instance of unexamined parody and racialized camp. Chapter three sources the impact of Ganesh's mythographic and science fictional forms in her 1990s guerilla poster activism around queer Asian American awareness in New York City, and re-imagines queer and feminist narrative possibilities in her fantastic goddess iconography. Finally, the fourth chapter demonstrates the currency and limits of playfulness in emerging art practices from the South Asian diaspora. I focus on the work of Canadian artists Brendan Fernandes and Mehra, whose engagement with the art commodity has the capacity to call out (and/or perpetuate) the neoliberal multiculturalism of the art market.

The four chapters demonstrate that while it is indeed critical to voice outrage over such injustices, voicing it through outrageous form offers unique and political possibilities that are less vulnerable to easy dismissals. I maintain that artists have made use of this strategy, but the visual culture of difference has not been framed in this way. Finally, as my analyses of Gupta and Ganesh demonstrate more acutely, I call for a theory of play grounded in a queer and feminist transnational analytic. Indeed, as two major case studies in my study, chapters two and three envision the subversive shape of playful form as a queer and feminist gaze. Indeed, beyond redress, a release of pent-up aggressions, and an exposure of structural incongruities, play offers a creative, porous, and capacious mode of critique and agitation that is queer in form.

## Reframing the Diaspora in Art History

In the 1950s and 1960s, restrictive immigration policies were abolished in Britain and North America, which led to a rapid growth in immigrant communities from South Asia. By the 1980s, a critical mass of progressive thinking artists, activists, and community organizers had emerged. Against assimilationist policies that limited definitions of cultural difference to national heritage, this emergent community reshaped the South Asian diaspora as a political community committed to social change. Art historians, historians, and cultural studies scholars, like Stuart Hall, Kobena Mercer, Vivek Bald, Lisa Lowe, and recently Courtney Martin and Anantha Sudhakar align this redefinition with a concurrent rise in race consciousness and anti-colonial intellectual production. Amidst this political emergence within the South Asian diaspora, a new kind of art practice also took shape.

Asian American studies scholar, Sudhakar argues that an aesthetics of “conditional futures” came to frame the confluence of art and community organizing within the South Asian diaspora in New York, London, and Toronto in the 1990s.<sup>6</sup> In line with critical hope thinkers like Ernst Bloch and José Muñoz, Sudhakar’s notion of conditional futures encapsulates how artists were imagining future visions of diasporic community, modes of collectivity that did not yet exist but were rife with possibility – this is what Bloch and Muñoz refer to as the not-yet-conscious. However, now that enough time has past, we can look back at the 1980s and 1990s and assess what it means to look back at an emergent time now that another set of politics and conditions inform

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<sup>6</sup> Anantha Sudhakar, “Conditional Futures: South Asian American Cultural Production and Community Formation, 1991-2001” (PhD dissertation, Rutgers University, 2011).

the artistic labor and the circulation of art. For example, since 1989, with the end of the cold war and the establishment of unfettered capitalism, the art world has witnessed a global turn in which the category of contemporary art expanded to include the previously marginalized, finally updating its views around contemporary art production as a genuinely global phenomenon.<sup>7</sup> Concurrently, the global turn also saw the most influential art institutions treating these art objects like touristic prostheses, with scopophilic and superficial expectations around what international art objects are supposed to convey vis-à-vis the artist's culture of origin. And so, despite the horizon of hope and possibility that Sudhakar argues sprung out of the 1990s in North America, what *has* arrived, in the meantime, is a sentiment of tolerance and tokenism in the art world alongside a more dispersed and less intense sense of community. And so, how might artists think past this particular "quagmire of the present,"<sup>8</sup> to quote the first page of Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia* (2009), which stifles future-oriented and multi-dimensional forms of belonging in difference for the sake of more pragmatic, that is to say, practical and presentist imaginations?

I advance a notion of subversive playfulness in transnational art practices as an inherently destabilizing aesthetic. The transnational turn in diaspora studies, which critiques the dominant view that migration patterns flow from points of departure to arrival, captures more fluid and multi-dimensional forms of human movement across time and space. Recent scholarship working at the intersections of area studies and diaspora studies values an aesthetic analysis that speaks to these paradigmatic shifts. For

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<sup>7</sup> This is not to say that art making and circulation was not global prior to 1989, but that western art markets finally saw profit in pluralizing its bases beyond centers like New York and Paris.

<sup>8</sup> José Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1.

example, literature and film studies track narrative forms that capture the dispersed sense of community formations across geographic borders.<sup>9</sup> Science fiction in particular offers vivid allegories to migrant alienation and other-worldliness.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, documentary studies have developed aesthetic techniques, such as visual blurring and staging, to creatively represent the politically dispossessed and censored realities, respectively.<sup>11</sup> In chapter two, my discussion of Gupta's photo series *Exiles* (1986) develops a connection between staged photography and censored realities, both in India and among the British diaspora.

Anthropologists and cultural studies and affect theory scholars unsettle the meaning of nostalgia by critiquing binary notions of location and nationhood.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Ganesh's zine *Tales of Amnesia* (2002), which I examine in chapter three, gestures towards undoing what Gayatri Gopinath terms the hetero-patriarchal myths of postcolonial nationalist projects in South Asia.<sup>13</sup> Ganesh's goddesses assume a form that challenges textual formation. The zine's images and texts do not correlate to one another and as such deny any narrative flow from frame to frame. Rather than counter one narrative with another, however, and rather than exhume long-forgotten tales that center

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<sup>9</sup> Sam Durrant and Catherine M. Lord, *Essays In Migratory Aesthetics: Cultural Practices Between Migration and Art-Making* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007).  
Timothy Yu, *Race and the Avant-Garde: Experimental and Asian American Poetry Since 1965* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> Jessica Langer, *Postcolonialism and Science Fiction* (Houndmills, Basingstoke Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).  
Eric D. Smith, *Globalization, Utopia, and Postcolonial Science Fiction: New Maps of Hope* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

<sup>11</sup> T.J. Demos, *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary During Global Crisis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

<sup>12</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Uprootings/Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration* (Oxford: Berg, 2003).  
Ahmed, "Melancholic Migrants," in *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).  
Purnima Mankekar, *Unsettling India: Affect, Temporality, Transnationality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 21.

femininity, *Tales of Amnesia*'s goddess imagery sits in dissonance with its accompanying text, rendering narrative logic opaque. This opacity brings me to Samantha Pinto's scholarship on aesthetics. "[O]ther than the teleology of [...] displacement,"<sup>14</sup> *Tales of Amnesia*'s aesthetic terrain enacts the illegibility of queer desire within certain nationalist and diasporic discourses. Reading difference versus merely representing it, *Tales of Amnesia* invents a language that reveals the order that underlies representation, manifesting how "difficult subjects require difficult objects."<sup>15</sup> Building on Gopinath and Pinto's interventions, I too emphasize the form that politics takes, namely how Ganesh's comics re-imagine the ideological significance of goddess iconography. Ultimately, chapter three shows how she engenders another kind of narrative process, one that does not necessarily disavow a relationship between image and text, but that basks in the encrypted knowledge their dissonance conjures. Beyond a metaphor for rupture, the goddess becomes a vehicle through which the capacity to imagine a queer, erotic connection between diaspora and nation becomes possible.<sup>16</sup>

The most recent generation of art historians with expertise in Asia have been working against disciplinary pressures that insist on nation-specific histories, and are mapping transnational genealogies for art production and artist subjectivities.<sup>17</sup> For Iftikhar Dadi, Muslim South Asia is an inherently transnational rubric that allows him to

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<sup>14</sup> Samantha Pinto, *Difficult Diasporas: The Transnational Feminist Aesthetic of the Black Atlantic* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 3.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> The queerness of this erotic connection dethrones nostalgia as the dominant affect that characterizes the diaspora's relationship to the homeland.

<sup>17</sup> Iftikhar Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2010).

Sonal Khullar, *Worldly Affiliations: Artistic Practice, National Identity, and Modernism in India, 1930-1990* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015).

Margo Machida, *Unsettled Visions: Contemporary Asian American Artists and the Social Imaginary* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

trace the circulation of aesthetics across Islamic traditions in the region. Engendering transnational trajectories within art history, Dadi's work on South Asia offers a postcolonial critique of a discipline that has historically and systemically dismissed the value of rigorous intellectual investigation into arts and crafts outside the western imaginary. Drawing on Dadi's interventions in transnational studies, I re-frame critical scholarship on diasporic art, which has also been mostly limited to nationalist trajectories. For example, South Asians in London, New York City, and Toronto have rarely been placed in conversation with one another. By contrast, I am invested in comparing these sites and the formal and ideological kinships they project.

Seeing through diaspora – that is to say, assessing theories of diaspora and transnationalism alongside experiences of human mobility to examine how the formal elements of artworks from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries narrate and reshape such positionalities anew – my project treats migration as a political condition and considers the role of the visual in enacting and translating such realities to a larger audience. As Saloni Mathur's anthology *The Migrant's Time* (2011) outlines, the complex and fraught processes of migration, mobility, and human movement (which have become emblematic of the contemporary era) have found expression in the visual arts in the form of thematic commentary alongside the “migratory nature of visual forms.”<sup>18</sup> They have also influenced the conditions of art production, reception, and display. The series of essays has a global scope, and where South Asia is concerned – Aamir Mufti's contribution on Zarina Hashmi's art for instance – the here and there of the disjunctive past from the present is palpably addressed, fleshing out the temporally

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<sup>18</sup> Ed. Saloni Mathur, *The Migrant's Time: Rethinking Art History and Diaspora* (Williamstown: Yale University Press, 2011), xiii.



affective elements of migration through an otherwise spatial trope. Diaspora resonates with various processes and modes of being – exilehood, globalization, multiculturalism, nomadism, (un)belonging, nostalgia, resistance, collectivity, hybridity, critical utopianism, and solidarity among people of color – offering a broad constellation of concerns that inflect uncertain conditions of human displacement and transplantation. Margo Machida produces an Asian American art history that undoes homogenizing racial and ethnic categorizations. However, I depart from this approach, which still assumes a certain sense of collectivity based on shared politics, and develop an analysis of play that is multifold: first, I locate my analysis in a moment of community emergence; second, I treat play as a methodological tool that challenges conventional narratives around diasporic art; finally, I focus on specific iterations of play such as parody, camp, and sarcasm, and broaden their uses as aesthetic strategies at the heart of the visual culture of difference.

### Developing a Theory of Play at the Heart of the Visual Culture of Difference

As one of the most prominent texts to outline the relationship between play and culture, Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (1938) describes the ludic as an integral part of the human condition. The Dutch theorist and historian theorizes play as foundational to cultural imagination. Beyond the flippant associations related to playfulness, such as being youthful, engaging in child's play, or losing one's moral compass, Huizinga casts play as “‘different’ from ‘ordinary life,’”<sup>19</sup> – as a temporary suspension of rule. Play

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<sup>19</sup> Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 28.

represents an escape from convention, the trappings of accepted narratives, and unquestioned modes of being. Within these suspended states, play can express collective social frustrations while gesturing towards counter-cultural possibility as well. Theorizing play as an alternative reality endows it with the capacity to test other cultural repertoires, like a laboratory for expressing frustrations less permitted in societal spheres that demand more conformity. The ludic allows for exploration and unforeseen experimentation, with the potential to reframe and potentially undermine the status quo; herein lies the subversive potential of play.

Bearing in mind the political potential of play, I develop a theory of play as an aesthetic strategy within the visual culture of difference that offers alternative ways of understanding the politics of representation. My project counters how the study of art is generally approached as a serious endeavor likened to scientific inquiry (and for good reason); because there has been a role for play in art, largely a subversive one. Although historical scholarship has generally evaded the topic, extensive histories of cartooning and satire mark the value of play as a mode of dissent. Recent efforts examine playful form in art as a counter-narrative to modernist ideals that aspired to achieve rational, pure, and stable form. For example, despite the high theory (and thus “high seriousness”) that informs much of the scholarship surrounding Marcel Duchamp’s endeavors, his disinterested forms, which yielded obscurity, dissonance, and contradiction in meaning, were a destabilizing force in art history that irrevocably changed the rules of the game.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, Surrealism and its activation of desire and Dadaism’s embrace of shock and

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<sup>20</sup> Gavin Parkinson, “The Duchamp Code,” in *From Diversion to Subversion: Games, Play, and Twentieth Century Art*, ed. David Getsy (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011), 25–45.

aimlessness were also unprecedented in the way they proposed a new visual idiom against the concept of objectivity. Indeed, play has manifested an indeterminate presence and a process of constant flux mobilized against static norms in art. During the 1990s, the Women's Action Coalition (WAC) deployed irreverently playful tactics as an integral part of their civil disobedience. Yet at the same time, these examples also demonstrate how the subversive tactics of playful form have only been examined within the context of whiteness. Only recently has play been examined within the context of contemporary non-white art; Derek Conrad Murray's *Queering Post-Black Art: Artists Transforming African-American Identity After Civil Rights* (2016) stands out given his interest in visual satire. And so, although playful aesthetics are beginning to be acknowledged as institutionally and paradigmatically disruptive, art historical scholarship has yet to fully investigate the impact of playful form within the visual culture of difference and the structural forces this particular body of work troubles.

In contemporary art, see for example, *State of Play* at the Serpentine Gallery (2004); *No Laughing Matter* (1991–1993), which traveled to a number of university galleries in Canada and the United States; and *Lighten Up: Art with a Sense of Humor* at the DeCordova Museum (2001), Lincoln MA. These exhibitions build on previous initiatives from the 1980s, such as *Comic Art* at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (1983) and *Comic Iconoclasm* at the Institute of Contemporary Art, London (1987). Although there are notable exceptions to the whiteness of visual humor – for example, *Indian Humor* (1995) at the American Indian Contemporary Arts Center, San Francisco, CA and *All About Laughter and The Smile in Japanese Art* at the Mori Museum, Tokyo (2007) – the geographic and temporal disparateness of these initiatives

elucidates an overall paucity of concerted efforts to chronicle formal playfulness within the visual culture of difference as a political strategy.

If playful forms have been deployed as tactical and disarming aesthetic strategies with the capacity to agitate social change, historically they have also relied on an archive of imagery that caricaturizes difference itself *for* comic effect. Images of difference have been historically spectacularized as a way to foreground their status as in fact other.<sup>21</sup> In performance, the minstrel tradition is a perfect example. Various scholars have mobilized the subversive capacities of play in their conceptions of difference. For instance, Homi Bhabha's notion of "colonial mimicry"<sup>22</sup> finds agency in social camouflaging, where the act of resembling those in power can prove to be a menacing performance, especially if ironic in its posturing. As Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña's performance *Couple in a Cage* (1992) demonstrates, the other has been made to perform their otherness since the moment of the colonial encounter and conquest, oftentimes in the form of forced labor (consider the history of human zoos, with the World's Fair during the fin-de-siècle era as a prime example). Fusco and Gómez-Peña toured museums around the world intentionally posing as Amerindians from "Guatinau," a land they made up as miraculously untouched by colonization. As they ate, slept, danced, and marveled at modern technology for the pleasure of their audiences, spectators were convinced that they were an authentic ethnographic display, rather than a mockery of one. *Couple in a*

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<sup>21</sup> Patricia Robertson, "Mae West's Maids: Race, 'Authenticity,' and the Discourse of Camp," in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: a Reader*, edited by Fabio Cleto. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999).

Tavia Nyong'o, "Racial Kitsch and Black Performance," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 15, no. 2 (2002): 371–391.

Richard Schur, "Post-Soul Aesthetics in Contemporary African Art," *African American Review*, 41, no. 4 (Winter, 2007), 641–654.

<sup>22</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 89.

*Cage* sheds light on the contemporaneous appetite for spectacles of difference. Hall also takes up the spectacle of the other when thinking through media representations and how they comprise a system of signs that construct but also deconstruct the impact of the visual in marking difference.<sup>23</sup>

As Bhabha and Hall identify performative markers of difference with upending potential within a context of race and empire, Judith Butler's scholarship on the social construction of gender also makes use of play. Describing drag as a parody of gender expectations, her ideas around subversive gender practices pivot around a powerful critique around heteronormativity and the normative functions of gender. Showing how performance maintains gender norms, she notes how performance can never be repeated exactly or precisely, and it is in this space that the potential for repetition with a difference exists.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, Susan Rubin Suleiman's analysis of gender in the avant-garde pursues a feminist theory of parody. An important publication on women and modernist art, *Subversive Intent* (1990) provocatively interrogates gender politics in avant-garde art. Analyzing Surrealist work, she draws on Julia Kristeva's notion of intertextuality to develop a theory of parody as perversely feminist in its humor.<sup>25</sup>

Building on these studies, I find play an especially compelling aesthetic strategy that does not simply produce counter-images to discriminatory ones, but that renders accepted narratives around them absurd. By emphasizing the upending capacities of play within minoritarian praxis, my project defuses the power dynamics deployed in producing images of difference. I draw on Muñoz's theory of disidentification, which

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<sup>23</sup> Stuart Hall, "The Spectacle of the 'Other,'" in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall et al. (London: Sage in association with the Open University, 1997).

<sup>24</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>25</sup> Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

enacts a mode of minoritarian performance that not only counters majoritarian discourses, but that reformats toxic power dynamics in order to subvert them. Sara Warner makes an argument for play as “performances of redress that transform the vicious banality of [racism,] homophobia, and misogyny into something fantastic and fabulous.”<sup>26</sup> Indeed, as scholarship within performance studies enables me to think through play as an embodied practice, I explore the broader aesthetic range within performance, but also photography, video, painting, sculpture, comics, collage, and installation.

I conceive of play as an aesthetic category of which there are multiple manifestations, including parody, camp, failure, and sarcasm. Case studies in my four chapters elaborate on their aesthetic textures. For example, in chapter two, Gupta’s *Exiles* parodies the documentary form as a way to undermine the conventions of archival practice, especially where censored bodies are concerned. According to Linda Hutcheon, parody is an intertextual dialog between texts, where the copy aims to undermine the authority and accepted discourse around the original.<sup>27</sup> Oftentimes the juxtapositions between the two are disarming, and as such, trouble the ostensible binary between original and copy; but they also frequently “mock objects of reverence and authority, toppling them from their exalted position by rendering them absurd and ridiculous.”<sup>28</sup> In chapter three, Chitra Ganesh’s *Tales of Amnesia* parodies goddess iconography in myth as a way to engender another kind of storytelling about the feminine.

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<sup>26</sup> Sara Warner, *Acts of Gaiety: LGBT Performance and the Politics of Pleasure* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2013), 192.

<sup>27</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (New York: Methuen, 1985).

<sup>28</sup> Warner, *Acts of Gaiety*, 18.

Whereas parody relies on dissonant juxtaposition to shed light on ludicrous formations, camp relies on exaggerated form. While this excess has predominantly been deployed to express the uncontainability of gender and sexuality, I broaden the uses of camp by considering its racialized dimensions. And so, as I analyze Gupta's photographic series *Sun City* in chapter two as a manifestation of under-examined orientalist camp, I do not emphasize the work's over-performance of desire or gender expression, but the performative excess of asexuality and undesirability – and I view this as a commentary on the racial codedness of gay male desire in the bathhouse, also named Sun City.

In over-performing asexuality and undesirability, the main character in *Sun City* ultimately fails at enacting bathhouse etiquette. In failing to conform, however, the protagonist exposes the underlying power dynamics structuring the sexual space. In *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), Jack Halberstam offers a theory of failure that interrogates the drive towards success and progress. Putting forward the option to better fail as an alternative, he de-centers success narratives and narratives that move “forward” as the only modes of process worth pursuing. In chapter four, Fernandes' *Foe* (2010) also illuminates how failure can offer productive new ways of (un)knowing. In the video performance, the artist fails at iterating three accents tied to his diasporic background – Canadian, Kenyan, and Indian – a performance that ultimately calls out expectations around diasporic subjectivity and what it means to sound “different.” Failure manifests in *Sun City* and *Foe* as each artwork overturns norms and expectations, around navigating the bathhouse and migrant sound respectively. I claim that their manifestation of failure is playful because of how they also render these expectations absurd. *Sun City* and *Foe* do not simply fail at their intended performances; there is a dissonance to overt asexuality in

a bathhouse and there is a dissonance to Fernandes' accents. These disconnects ultimately ask the viewer to suspend and reframe what they think they know and what constitutes "success" within minoritarian praxis.

Finally, Mehra's readymade art sculptures embrace the art commodity through a sarcastic tone, made most evident in the jarring juxtapositions her art objects and titles engender. For example, her 2010 Jaguar car frame that is spray-painted gold in a do-it-yourself fashion hangs on the wall like a trophy emblemizing the immigrant ethos. However, its title, *(I am the American Dream) Still Just a Paki*, bluntly recasts the object as a ruse for immigrant success in the age of multiculturalism's bamboo ceiling. Together, the synthesis of image and text is difficult to consume. Moreover, her harsh tone effectively degrades the value of the car, resisting commodification ironically by virtue of a blinged-out commodity.

### Chapter Outline

Chapter one, titled "Art in the Age of Identity: The Emergence of South Asian Diasporic Art and the Elision of Play," historicizes the category of the South Asian diaspora that emerged during the 1980s and 1990s. I trace the dominant narratives that surface in art criticism and observe how an aesthetics of oppositionality and utopian possibility has dominated discourse around the visual culture of difference. I do so in order to set the stage for my reappraisal of current artistic practice in the South Asian diaspora, namely from Britain and North America. I conduct a contextual analysis of art exhibitions that played a key role in conceiving South Asian diasporic art (Afro-Asian



initiatives within the British Black Arts Movement of the 1980s, and the Asian American art scene that emerged in the 1990s: shows like *The Other Story* [1989] and *Fatal Love* [2005], respectively). Crucially, by analyzing artworks for the presence of playfulness, I inquire into its elision, then offer a study that takes play as my primary object of art historical and aesthetic analysis. Artworks by Sutapa Biswas, Rasheed Arareen, and Sa'dia Rehman figure as main case studies of elided play. Ultimately I argue that these art practices' embrace of play has remained under-examined as political and aesthetic interventions.

In chapter two, "Posture and Place in Sunil Gupta's *Exiles* and *Sun City*: A Case of Under-Examined Play," I investigate two major photo series in Gupta's career as cases of under-examined play: *Exiles*, which he produced during his formative years in London, and *Sun City*, a recent production from his time in New Delhi. As a queer, HIV-positive artist whose practice emerged as part of the Black Arts Movement in London in the 1980s, Gupta found in identity politics a productive tool through which to make photographs about community. However, these politics of identity have also pigeonholed his work as myopically invested in community visibility. By contrast, I foreground Gupta's attention to play, thereby broadening the reception of Gupta's practice as an example of queer visual representation negotiated by playful form. For example, whereas *Exiles* has been received as an ethnographic exercise about gay Indian men, I emphasize how the staged quality of the documentary photographs speak more loudly to the censored realities of the artist's gay subjects and so speaks more to the visual logics of invisibility than the visibility project it has been received as. On the other hand, while *Sun City*, a campy tableau vivant of a gay immigrant protagonist wandering through a

Parisian bathhouse, has been received as a triumph for gay Indian male fantasy, I revise this reception by emphasizing the racialized uses of camp. Highlighting the highly orientalized interior of the bathhouse that inhabits the main character's excessive asexuality and undesirability, I argue that the photographic series parodies the colonial formation and residues in gay male desire, a critical lens that has not animated the photographic series' reception. In doing so I broaden the uses of camp by marking its racial dynamics while also evidencing how inappropriate, over the top, orientalist sensibilities inform gay male desire.

Huizinga cites myth as one of the oldest forms of play, and in chapter three I explore how Ganesh exploits mythological narratives to imagine other possibilities for goddess iconography. Titled "Chitra Ganesh: Re-imagining Goddess Iconography in Myth and Science Fiction," chapter three considers Ganesh's contribution to playful aesthetics in the visual culture of difference by emphasizing the role of fantasy in her imagery. Two main artworks stand out: her zine, *Tales of Amnesia* (2002), and her mural installation, *Eyes of Time* (2014). *Tales of Amnesia* intervenes in the tradition of comics by boldly caricaturing Hindu fundamentalist depictions of the feminine, structured by the hetero-patriarchal nationalist ideology that myth-based comic book series from the 1970s like *Amar Chitra Katha* perpetuate. Through intertextual dialog, Ganesh parodies *Amar Chitra Katha*'s goddess imagery to create fantastical possibilities both for her goddesses and for mythological storytelling. In *Eyes of Time*, a site-specific mural in the Brooklyn Museum of Art is accompanied by a vitrine of objects from the permanent collection chosen specifically by the artist. Transforming the mythological goddess Kali through a

science fictional aesthetic, Ganesh's goddess figure becomes a metaphor for feminist institutional critique, that is, for imagining another kind of future for museul display.

In my final chapter, "From Community to Commodity: The Currency and Limits of Playful Form," I evidence the social capital and constraints of playful aesthetics in emerging artists with various transnational connections to South Asia. By analyzing key artworks by Canadian artists Fernandes and Mehra, I demonstrate the need to challenge the neoliberal multiculturalism of the contemporary art world that has packaged and prescribed what difference should look like. I began this introduction with Canadian Indian artist, Divya Mehra, whose bitter tone rides a fine line between a bad joke and a teaching moment. Through sarcastic humor, she urges her viewership to be more attentive to the ironies embedded in community formations. I read Fernandes' video performance *Foe* as a tongue-in-cheek embodiment of failed migrant sound manifested by his "bad" performance of accents. By turning expectations of what accents should sound like on their heads, he makes a spectacle of the art world's fascination with hybridity – a common reference in diaspora studies. Reciting lines from J.M. Coetzee's 1986 novel (with the same title, *Foe*) in his Canadian, Indian, and Kenyan accents, Fernandes attempts the impossible task of parsing out his so-called cultural allegiances and undermines any attempt to do so. As he tries in earnest but inevitably fails to meet conventional expectations around what a particular culture should sound like, I draw on Halberstam's notion of queer failure as a productive interrogation of normative structures of success.

Ultimately, play offers a way to defuse the power dynamics involved in images of difference, and my project specifically explores the potential of this aesthetic strategy as

it relates to moments of community emergence. I develop a theory of play, in part, to disrupt and expose how moments of emergence, generally associated with newness and possibility, quickly become contained in regulatory ways. Generally speaking, emergent phenomena are difficult to define because of the way they are, by design, elusive and contingent; and in aiming to become more legible, a containing of sorts must occur.

Within the context of art in the age of multiculturalism, when the art world encountered difference anew, it aimed to render this “difference” legible. The result: a reductive packaging that limited otherwise complex aesthetic interventions to marginalized content, visibility projects, and thematic trends. During the 1980s and 1990s artists were demanding recognition; however, the art world responded by *only* seeing their difference. I study the consequences of this narrative and ultimately challenge this trajectory.

Arguably then, attention to playful aesthetics disrupts the chronormativity of art history, which adheres to a conventional time from emergence to containment. A project that centers play challenges this process of institutionalization, a process that normalizes a teleological conception of progress in the art world. And while artists of color will continue to become subsumed by the global turn, in this project I aim to pause and assess the texture of their aesthetic labor.

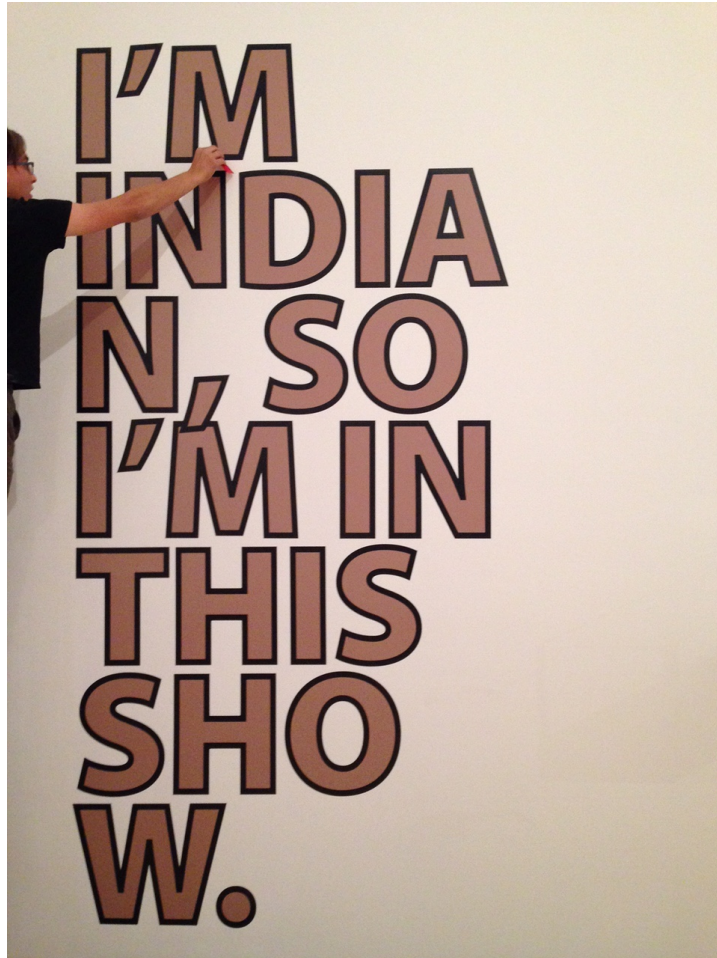


Figure 0.1  
Divya Mehra. *Contemporary South Asian Art*, 2015/2010. 120" x 60"

**CHAPTER ONE**  
**Art in the Age of Identity:**  
**The Emergence of South Asian Diasporic Art and the Elision of Play**

In 1965, after the United States relaxed its restrictive immigration laws, the nation's Asian population began to increase at unprecedented rates. By the 1990s the next generation of immigrants, characterized as the "children of '65," had for the first time grown into a critical mass. Emerging out of this new mass, a community of artists turned to "identity" as an organizing principle in developing their aesthetic practice in the diaspora. Rather than preserving cultural heritage though, their work interrogated the limiting structures undergirding identification. This is especially true with regards to identity and its connection to national background; for instance, identifying exclusively with the Indian American or Pakistani American diaspora meant ignoring the rich connections and affiliations that exist *across* South Asian territories. This progressive contingency within the South Asian diaspora reconceived itself as a collective under the rubric "South Asian American," which engendered a politicized sense of community based on solidarity across multiple sites of oppression: histories of systemic inequities in colonialism, racism, sexism, homophobia, and gentrification. Within the US, many congregated in New York City, which soon developed into "a hotbed of ideas and movements."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Alexandra Chang, Nancy Hom, Tomie Arai, Jaishri Abichandani, and Lenore Chinn, "Narratives of the Time: the 1990s and Asian American Art," in *Local/Express: Asian American Arts and Community 90s NYC*, ed. Curtis Chin et al. (Crownsville: Asian American Literary Review, 2013), 85.

A decade earlier, the United Kingdom had witnessed a comparable cultural and political shift in the form of the Black Arts Movement. As post-WWII immigration policies loosened up, the non-white population in the UK, in London in particular, grew dramatically, and by the 1980s a group of radical Afro-Asian artists had come of age and was eager to change the rules of the game. Organizing themselves under the rubric “Black,” a political mode of identification that aimed to build solidarity among British communities from former colonies in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean, these artists made an urgent call for political-aesthetic shifts within the London art world, challenging its Eurocentrism. Although the work and impact of these communities in London in the 1980s and New York City in the 1990s have not been historicized as comparable sites invested in making socially conscious art, the emergence of South Asian diasporic artists within the Asian American and Black British context suggests a uniquely transnational story that has yet to be fully disentangled. By investigating their emergences in conversation with one another, this chapter connects these multiple sites of South Asian diasporic art. By doing so, I assess the aesthetic manifestations of these crossings as part of a broader dialog on what I call art in the Age of Identity – both art making and criticism, with an eye for historically marginalized subject positions as embodied by a socialist, feminist, queer, and postcolonial gaze in art historical analysis.

Art in this Age of Identity is largely remembered for centering content at the expense of form. In the heyday of identity politics and the rise of multiculturalism, a politics of recognition developed at a discursive level that signaled a pronounced and irrevocable shift in art criticism. Projects generating visibility for historically marginalized material came to the fore, and as a result, terminologies of art, community,

and diaspora “underwent critical debates stretching from sites of self-claimed group empowerment to a no man’s land marked by the politically positioned categorization of ‘identity art,’ ‘issue-driven art’ and ‘multiculturalism’ in the art world.”<sup>30</sup> However, despite such unprecedented interventions in the art world, the focus on visibilizing projects, largely signified by representational content, otherwise deemed illegitimate within the history of (western) art, has not been accompanied by a robust enough analysis of aesthetic form. While art discourse in the Age of Identity aimed to counter the culturally regulatory logic of the art world (heteronormativity, white supremacy, misogyny), it did not serve to disidentify – reframe or dismantle – these regimes of thought, and so power structures of the majoritarian public have remained firmly in place. As a result, there is notable malaise in how identity has been deployed as an organizing principle. Artistic practice from the 1980s and 1990s has been largely fossilized, manifesting an incipient fatigue around the political impact of identity politics as an organizing principle in art.

On the other hand, very recent emerging scholarship offers a formal analysis of art in the Age of Identity. Scholars like Black British art historian Courtney Martin and Asian Americanist Anantha Sudhakar investigate artistic practice beyond representational content by thinking through aesthetic categories that parallel the political conditions from which they emerge. For example, Martin develops a language for Black British art that is necessarily oppositional in its aesthetic tone, while Sudhakar argues that the 1990s New York City South Asian American art scenes (both visual and literary) engendered an

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<sup>30</sup> Chang et al., “Narratives of the Time,” 62.



aesthetics of futurity and imminent possibility.<sup>31</sup> These newly politicized communities of diasporic artists do in fact demonstrate how aesthetic characteristics exceed representational paradigms of the socio-political, affirming Timothy Yu's assertion of the inseparability of the aesthetic and the social.<sup>32</sup> In the words of Amitava Kumar, who argues that cultural production invoking solidarity has the capacity to transform social lives, "political aesthetics [...] [had] the swing, the agility of history itself."<sup>33</sup> Building on these aesthetic framings that center on opposition and critical utopianism, my dissertation mines the historical record for other aesthetic openings within the visual culture of difference. More precisely, I ask how might an aesthetic strategy like playfulness in art mobilize ridicule, exaggeration, and parodic inversion as a politically subversive rebuke. I emphasize play as an aesthetic strategy in order to broaden the notion that an aesthetic that *only* opposes the status quo organizes art production by artists of color. However, how might aesthetics that rely on other strategies gesture towards reframing and undermining the status quo?

I study South Asian diasporic art making in London and New York City for the presence and enactment of playfulness, and argue that this kind of analytical lens as a politically aesthetic intervention has remained unexamined. In this chapter, I demonstrate how a playful aesthetic was endemic to the era but was de-emphasized as politically inefficacious. It was after all the 1980s and the stakes were quite different. As Kobena Mercer maintains in the introduction of the anthology, *No Laughing Matter* (2016), in an

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<sup>31</sup> Courtney J. Martin, "Cyclones in the Metropole: British Artists, 1968–1989" (PhD dissertation, Yale University, 2010); Anantha Sudhakar, "Conditional Futures: South Asian American Cultural Production and Community Formation, 1991–2001" (PhD dissertation, Rutgers University, 2011).

<sup>32</sup> Timothy Yu, *Race and the Avant-garde: Experimental and Asian American Poetry Since 1965* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 2.

<sup>33</sup> Amitav Kumar, *Passport Photos* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 236.

attempt to be taken seriously and to win recognition among the institutions of high culture, discourse around the visual culture of difference has not considered the critical valence of humor.<sup>34</sup> The study of art and art history is generally approached as a serious endeavor likened to scientific inquiry, but there has been a role for humor in art, largely a subversive one with countercultural effects. Interestingly enough, playful forms have often relied on caricaturizing difference for comic effect. Indeed, images of difference have been historically received as spectacle, a reception that has foregrounded their status as in fact other. For this reason, I find upending forms like parody, camp, and sarcasm compelling aesthetic strategies that do not simply produce counter-images to discriminatory representations, but that render the accepted narratives around them absurd. Play offers a way to subvert images of difference – diffusing and disarming the power dynamics involved through humor, in a way that troubles and exceeds fixed ways of looking and interpretation. If diasporic art is largely driven by the desire to self-narrate, then play provides an opportunity to upend the stereotypical narratives that have saturated the visual culture of difference. And although visual artists and theorists during the Age of Identity labored to contest these narratives, their efforts came largely at the expense of a deeper and more complex analysis of what diasporic art actually *does*, versus what it simply reacts to.

I commence my project of mapping the role of aesthetic playfulness in the South Asian diaspora by historicizing the emergence of South Asian diasporic communities, first in London and then New York City. By examining immigrant histories alongside art

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<sup>34</sup> Kobena Mercer, “Introduction,” in *No Laughing Matter: Visual Humor In Ideas of Race, Nationality, and Ethnicity*, ed. Angela Rosenthal et al. (Hanover, New Hampshire: Dartmouth College Press, 2016), 9.

reviews, curatorial statements, and artist interviews, I conduct a contextual analysis of the key role of art exhibitions in conceiving South Asian diasporic art. This chapter discusses *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain* (1989), which exhibited at the Hayward Gallery in London, and *Fatal Love: South Asian American Art Now* (2005), which exhibited at the Queens Museum of Art in New York City, as two key moments when contemporary South Asian art of the diaspora made unprecedented inroads into the art establishment. I will proceed by shifting the focus on the visual culture of difference, spotlighting and rereading works by Rasheed Araeen, Sutapa Biswas, and Sa'dia Rehman as unexamined examples of play in art in the Age of Identity. This chapter traces how the emergence of South Asian diasporic art in London and New York City demonstrates an elision of play, while the following chapters emphasize play as a way to re-imagine this community's historical emergence. As I make connections across geographical borders, I develop a transnational art history that focuses on overlooked aesthetic dimensions framing and informing art production in the diaspora. By doing so, I modify conventional understandings of South Asian transnational art-making initiatives.

### London, 1980s

The post-WWII context is key for studying the emergence of the South Asian diaspora in the UK. And yet, studying this emergence requires more than a straightforward immigration history that traces movements from one specific region to another. South Asian immigration trajectories intertwine with various histories of empire and are, as a result, inextricably bound to British notions of Blackness. Up until the

1990s, “Black” in the UK did not function as a racial category referring to individuals from sub-Saharan Africa, but as a catchall phrase for people from former British colonies in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and the Middle East; in this way, “Black” works as a multiracial category referencing non-white British populations. After WWII, Britain recruited subjects from the Commonwealth and its African, Asian, and Caribbean colonies to rebuild its war-torn nation. Seeking workers for manual labor and the service industry, immigration policies tended to these needs. The 1949 Nationality Act granted former inhabitants of the Commonwealth lifetime residence, a privilege that extended to their families as well. All held British citizenship. As the need for reconstruction increased in the early 1950s, policies relaxed even more; from the late 1940s through to the 1970s England witnessed its greatest influx of Black immigrants.<sup>35</sup> Migrants were drawn to the work opportunities, and the presence of ethnic minorities diversified the body politic. In response, the host nation grew hostile towards what would increasingly become viewed as an alien contagion of British society, one that threatened its pre-WWII homogeneous self-perception. More to the point, the non-white presence reminded Britain of the empire’s decline.

These sentiments, shared by politicians and the populace alike, contributed to systemic violence. From the 1950s to the 1970s, non-white British populations consistently encountered police brutality, public discrimination in the form of signs in shops and accommodation units that read, “No Blacks, No Dogs, No Irish,” and white

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<sup>35</sup> In 1952–1953 only 2,000 Commonwealth citizens arrived, but in 1958, 55,000 migrated from Asia alone, mostly Pakistan and India; and between 1955 and 1962 more than 200,000 migrants from the Caribbean alone crossed over. See Peter Fryer, *Black People in the British Empire* (London: Pluto Press, 1989); Winston James, “Migration, Racism, and Identity Formation: The Caribbean Experience in Britain,” in *Inside Babylon: The Caribbean Diaspora in Britain* (London: Verso, 1993).

fears around job security – all of which were exacerbated by the media. Indeed, the 1980s was consumed by images of the Black population framed as a threatening mass; the most visible example was the Brixton riots of July 1981. And, rather than placing such images of citizens battling the police in the context of immigration restrictions, unemployment, and police brutality, the media sensationalized Blacks as uncontrollably prone to violence. Needless to say, this skewed coverage contributed significantly to how the Black British community during this period became synonymous with criminality.<sup>36</sup>

Politicians were shameless in exploiting these anxieties, a strategy that had been fomenting unrest since the postwar and decolonization era. For example, in 1955, Prime Minister Winston Churchill popularized the slogan “Keep Britain White” for his elections. Enoch Powell’s infamous anti-immigrant speech from 1968 is archived as one of the most racist episodes in British political history. He used the metaphor of Britannia as an old white woman whose home was being invaded by Blacks, to which the only response must take the form of foaming “rivers of blood.”<sup>37</sup> In line with Powell’s gruesome statements, Margaret Thatcher’s government (1979–1990) further ignited fears of immigrants taking over. Furthermore, such vitriolic xenophobia was juridically sanctioned; the Immigration Act of 1971, for example, compromised the legal status of

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<sup>36</sup> Martin, “Cyclones in the Metropole,” 98–107.

<sup>37</sup> The full text of Enoch Powell’s speech, delivered on 20 April 1968 for the Conservative Association Meeting in Birmingham, UK, is available at:

“Enoch Powell’s ‘Rivers of Blood’ Speech,” *The Telegraph*, November 6, 2007, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/3643823/Enoch-Powells-Rivers-of-Blood-speech.html>

For more on Black British immigration history, see Edward Scobie, *Black Britannia: A History of Blacks in Britain* (Chicago: Johnson Pub. Co., 1972); Peter Fryer and Paul Gilroy, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 1984); Paul Gilroy, *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (London: Hutchinson, 1987); Kathleen Paul, *Whitewashing Britain: Race and Citizenship in the Postwar Era* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); Mike Phillips and Trevor Phillips, *Windrush: The Irresistible Rise of Multi-Racial Britain* (London: Harper Collins, 1999); Panikos Panayi, *An Immigration History of Britain: Multicultural Racism Since 1800* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2010).

Black migrants from former territories in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean, while also disrupting family units.<sup>38</sup>

Such racially motivated sentiments, policies, and violence targeting Britain's Black population set in motion the need for a collective response. Artistic practice reflected the conditions under which artists lived – an environment inescapably inflected by the racially hostile atmosphere of the Thatcher years, which in Stuart Hall's words "bore directly on the second generation born and schooled in Britain."<sup>39</sup> Eddie Chambers' essay "The Emergence of the Black Artist" indicates that while the decade after WWII witnessed a vibrant tradition of Black, mostly visiting or immigrant, artists working in the country, it was not until the 1970s that a younger, mostly British-born-and-raised community emerged and formed a critical mass that responded with full force to ideas of homelands and nationhood at this time of heightened xenophobia and historical erasure. Forming a multi-racial, multiethnic network, non-white artists pioneered avant-garde practices that explicitly confronted the nation's tumultuous political and economic realities. Creating Black art meant identifying, interacting, and reconciling with the historical impact of colonialism, slavery, and indenture in one's art, while provoking a contemporary response that gestured towards social change. Thus, artists of Afro-Caribbean descent like Keith Piper, Eddie Chambers, Ingrid Pollard, and Sonia Boyce

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<sup>38</sup> Those who themselves, or whose parents or grandparents, had been born, naturalized, or registered in the UK, or UK Commonwealth citizens who had resided in the UK for five years, could remain living in Britain; otherwise, one needed permission to enter. One could obtain a work permit, an option that did not lead to permanent residency. The language of the law disenfranchised and criminalized black migrants from former territories in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean, in contrast to white subjects from Canada, Australia, and South Africa, who could have at least one British relative. Prior to 1971, the Commonwealth Immigration Bill Act in 1968 limited the immigration and citizenship of Kenyans of Asian and African descent.

<sup>39</sup> Stuart Hall, "Assembling the 1980s: The Deluge – and After," in *Shades of Black: Assembling Black Arts in 1980s Britain*, ed. David A. Bailey et al. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 12.

conversed with the work of artists like Mona Hatoum (Lebanese-Palestinian) alongside a slew of artists of South Asian descent such as Rasheed Araeen and Sutapa Biswas, who I discuss in this chapter, Sunil Gupta, a key figure in Black British photography (see chapter two), and still others who made up a younger generation, such as Parminder Sekhon, Poulomi Desai, Zarina Bhimji, and Roshini Kempadoo.

At the time, a set of key thinkers framed the emerging discourse and the art production that came with it. Hall elaborates on the term “Black” as an “organizing category of a new politics of resistance”<sup>40</sup> within the diaspora that challenged the British art world to think beyond nationalist genealogies in art history. He also recognized the rise of gender and sexual politics as a decisive factor in the development of Black consciousness.<sup>41</sup> This point is important, given the way the Black Arts Movement has been criticized for its male-centric lens. Kobena Mercer envisioned the creation of new artistic identities under the heading “Black” as a “veritable ‘renaissance’ in all spheres of expression.”<sup>42</sup> In his doctoral research Chambers already was defining Black art as a “politicized form of art practice [...] characterized by a new attachment to social narratives [...] of explicit and implicit anti-racist positions.”<sup>43</sup> His two major publications, *Black Artists in British Art* (2014) and *Things Done Change* (2012), chart the history of Black art production. And finally, Rasheed Araeen, who was more militant

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<sup>40</sup> Stuart Hall, “New Ethnicities,” in *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader*, ed. Houston A. Baker, et al. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 163.

Also see Hall, “Black Diaspora Artists in Britain: Three ‘Moments’ in Post-war History,” *History Workshop Journal* 61, no. 1 (2006): 1–24.

<sup>41</sup> Hall, “Assembling the 1980s,” 15.

<sup>42</sup> Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 9.

<sup>43</sup> Edward Chambers, “The Emergence and Development of Black Visual Arts Activity in England Between 1981–1986: Press and Public Responses” (PhD dissertation, Goldsmiths College, University of London, 1998).

in his views and interventions, saw the 1980s as a critical response to “the social and political forces of the time” that “set an ideological framework for a militantly radical arts movement.”<sup>44</sup> Black artists and scholars like Araeen and Chambers often adopted the role of activist, writer, or curator to bring attention to work largely ignored by the established art world. Araeen has published numerous journals and articles and founded various publications, including *Black Phoenix* in 1978, the first magazine to address the mission of Black art. In 1987, he founded *Third Text*, his hugely influential journal that advanced a new kind of cultural theory as yet to be accepted in mainstream circles. In association with *Third Text*, he also founded Kala Press, which disseminated information on neglected African and Asian artists in Britain who contributed to post-war British art. As Hammad Nasar notes in his field notes from the Asian Art Archive online, “through his artwork, his writing and editorial work at *Third Text*, as well as his energetic participation in critical forums worldwide, Araeen has been at the forefront of the politically charged discourse between artists, institutions, and audiences for over four decades.”<sup>45</sup>

Indeed, the scholarship of Hall, Mercer, Chambers, and Araeen has labored to put the insurgent interventions of Black British art on the map. Emerging research by Martin, art historian of Black British contemporary art, adopts the most holistic approach. Rather than focus on the 1980s as the critical decade of radical political emergence, she surveys the longer *durée* of art making stemming from the 1970s.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, she distinguishes her project from the work of her predecessors by tracing the formation of Black

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<sup>44</sup> Rasheed Araeen, “The Success and Failure of the Black Arts Movement,” in Bailey, *Shades of Black*, 21.

<sup>45</sup> Hammad Nasar, “Notes from the Field: Navigating the Afterlife of The Other Story,” *Field Notes – Asia Art Archive* 04 (2016). <http://www.aaa.org.hk/FieldNotes/Details/1228>.

<sup>46</sup> Rasheed Araeen’s live performance *Paki Bastard* (1979), the BLK Art Group, and Mona Hatoum’s live work, *Variation on Discord and Divisions* (1984) figure as critical case studies.



aesthetics, often emblemized as aggressive, angry, and confrontational. In Martin's words, "[b]y their design, *black* was not simply what one was, but rather, how one made art."<sup>47</sup> Artists within the Black Arts Movement reclaimed Blackness, transforming the initially derogatory term into a state of political awakening. It was an aesthetic attention to unity and solidarity across difference that made one a Black artist. Martin's project offers a formal analysis of Blackness and makes her one of the first art historians to contextualize Black British art making beyond content-based analysis.

The reception of Araeen's curatorial show, *The Other Story* (1989), at the Hayward Gallery, represents a prime example of the consequences of prioritizing content at the expense of form. This survey of twenty-four artists proposed an alternative history of art production in Britain since WWII, albeit somewhat belatedly. As early as 1977, Araeen proposed his idea for *The Other Story* to the Arts Council; however, he would not receive adequate funding until 1989. Some twelve years in the making, *The Other Story* was the first major museum exhibition to showcase works by non-white British artists who remained unrecognized in British art – artists like Francis Newton Souza, Anwer Jalal Shemza, Uzo Egonu, and Mona Hatoum. Although the exhibition included work prior to the critical decade, the show was conceived in consonance with the cultural climate of the 1980s.<sup>48</sup> Araeen eloquently framed the material conditions out of which the

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<sup>47</sup> Martin, "Cyclones in the Metropole," 7. Martin does not capitalize "black" because she is re-conceiving the term as an aesthetic. I choose to remain consistent with the way the category was conceived during this time period and thus I capitalize "Black."

<sup>48</sup> Araeen's essay in *The Other Story*'s exhibition catalog, "Confronting the System," which covered the art careers of Gavin Jantje, Mona Hatoum, Eddie Chambers, Keith Piper, and Lubaina Himid, is most closely situated within the Black Arts Movement. The catalog also included brief artist biographies and a chronology of Black art in the UK, making the publication a comprehensive text on the matter.

long-awaited show emerged: “it’s the invisibility of [the] black historical subject that [forces us] to construct our visibility as part of the process of making things.”<sup>49</sup>

*The Other Story* marks a watershed moment in the development of post-war British art. The unprecedented press attention it received gave “credibility to the notion of a tangible history of Black-British artists’ practice.”<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, the reviews were not entirely positive. While some appreciated the show as a critical “turning-point”<sup>51</sup> and a “daring synthesis of the familiar and strange,”<sup>52</sup> others were disparaging in their poorly concealed racism. Harshly complaining that the works “borrow all and contribute nothing,”<sup>53</sup> some critics dismissed the show as, “not yet worth even a footnote in any history of 20th century western art.”<sup>54</sup> Peter Fuller’s review criticized the show as a case of reverse discrimination, given that its “criteria for inclusion are explicitly and exclusively racial.”<sup>55</sup> Amid such polarizing reviews that blindly dismissed the regulatory conditions and political framework undergirding Black art making, other voices were more thoughtful and nuanced in their critiques. For example, the show was criticized for its shaky premise on modernism and for its lack of variety in terms of media. The exhibition’s choice of artists was also disappointing to some, especially in the way it

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<sup>49</sup> Rasheed Araeen, “Black Art,” in *Black British Culture and Society: A Text-Reader*, ed. Kwesi Owusu (London: Routledge, 2000), 269.

<sup>50</sup> Edward Chambers, *Black Artists in British Art: A History from 1950 to the Present* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), 113.

<sup>51</sup> James Burr, “A Cultural Injection,” *Apollo* 131, no. 2 (February 1990): 126.

<sup>52</sup> Jane Bryce, “Opinion,” *Arts Review* (London) 42 (January 1990): 10.

<sup>53</sup> Brian Sewell, “Pride or Prejudice,” *Sunday Times*, November 26, 1989, 8, reprinted in Steve Edwards, *Art and Its Histories: A Reader* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 266.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 267.

<sup>55</sup> Peter Fuller, “Black Artists: Don’t Forget Europe,” *Sunday Telegraph*, December 10, 1989, 10, reprinted in Edwards, *Art and its Histories*, 268.

implied a false sense of collectivity while also reflecting a dearth of contributions by women (four only).<sup>56</sup>

Two major figures in Black cultural studies, Mercer and Paul Gilroy, responded to the show in the same issue of *Third Text* by speaking to the institutional forces at play. Their first point was that a single show cannot be expected to account for all post-war non-white creative practice in Britain. As a result, the artworks in the show appeared crowded into a chaotic narrative. While failing to adequately challenge dominant notions of art making, the show also did not necessarily create concepts or perspectives with which to view the history of art anew. However, the need for representation was certainly connected to the lack of exposure; if institutional support for shows like *The Other Story* was more commonplace, then expectations would not be so unrealistic. Mercer characterized these problematic expectations that art could speak for an entire community as the “burden of representation” for Black artists. And finally, the critics had narrowly focused on the reification of racial difference, ignoring the structural and institutional context from which the show emerged, thereby preventing *The Other Story* from being viewed as a corrective and re-historicization of modern art from a decidedly anti-racist position.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Homi Bhabha and Sutapa Biswas, “The Wrong Story,” *New Statesman*, December 15, 1989, 40–2.

Rita Keegan, “The Story so Far,” *Spare Rib*, February 1990, 36.

Lola Young, “Where do we go from Here: Musings on ‘The Other Story,’” *Oxford Art Journal* 13, no. 2 (1990): 51–54.

Carole Enahord, “The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain,” *Women Artists Slide Library Journal* (1990): 27.

<sup>57</sup> Kobena Mercer, “Black Art and the Burden of Representation,” *Third Text* 4, no. 10 (1990): 61–78.

Paul Gilroy, “Art of Darkness: Black Art and the Problem of Belonging to England,” *Third Text* 4, no. 10 (1990), 45–52.

Given *The Other Story*'s belatedness, Martin argues that the show did not celebrate but instead lamented the "rupture of Blackness as a political force in art."<sup>58</sup> Whether reviews were harsh or thoughtful, they primarily focused on content, specifically on the challenges of doing "identity" well, and on the challenges of "representing." And yet regardless of the show's reception, by 1989 "[t]he storm had blown over."<sup>59</sup> That is to say, the category "Black" would no longer signify a call for collective action the way it had been during its critical decade. By 1989, artists had moved beyond the discourse of visibility and were ushering in the 1990s, a period defined by a completely different set of political realities and aesthetic and market concerns, with very little overlap. For example, the market success of artists like Yinka Shonibare and Chris Ofili, Black artists who came of age during the 1990s, have arguably eclipsed the efforts of their predecessors, who have yet to achieve due recognition in the same way. Although *The Other Story* realized Blackness as a cultural category for the British public, it did so, ironically, just as the category was losing its critical valence and status as a collectivizing entity.<sup>60</sup> And while this phenomenon is not uncommon, it made for an unfortunate entrée for the first major Black art show. This emphasis on the burden of representation was an integral aspect of *The Other Story*'s reception, especially in the way it functioned as damage control. However, the show's belatedness and consequent reception, which focused mostly on content and unreasonable expectations in and around this "burden," worked to derail a critical formal analysis of art production as well. For example, while Keegan criticized the show for not including more crafts-based work and

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<sup>58</sup> Martin, "Cyclones in the Metropole," 215.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 221.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 214–15.

photography, her desire for different media was rooted in wanting different kinds of representations of Blackness.<sup>61</sup> A more incisive inquiry might ask how various media differently inflect the aesthetic textures of oppositionality and Blackness – in other words, what does an investment in different Black forms (rather than different representations of Blackness) look like? Martin’s study on Black aesthetics initiates a focus on the oppositional potential of form beyond historically marginalized content. As such, she enacts a critical gesture for the posterity of Black British art, doing justice to Hall’s statement that “our struggles were given form.”<sup>62</sup> Additionally, her scholarship animates how the crude and confrontational aesthetics of Black art challenged the parameters around what constituted Britishness in art. Building on this attention to aesthetic form, I focus on the under-examined role and impact of playful aesthetics in re-imagining identity in art.

There are under-examined moments in the historical record that incorporate a number of aesthetic strategies, including some that were more playful in their formation and oppositionality. Due to the urgency around developing a politics of recognition and the need to be taken seriously, these aspects have gone unseen. Indeed, when a community is under attack by majoritarian forces, a defensive reaction arguably feels like the most immediately effective option. However, given that the contemporary moment offers critical and temporal distance, I return to the archive and observe how an aesthetics of oppositionality can go beyond merely expressing dissatisfaction with the status quo. The following analysis of Sutapa Biswas’ *Housewives with Steak-Knives* (1984–85)

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<sup>61</sup> Keegan, “Story so Far,” 36.

<sup>62</sup> Hall, “Assembling the 1980s,” 19.

analyzes dissonant juxtapositions as a playful inversion of gender roles in order to broaden the artwork's reception beyond a visualization of feminist resistance (figure 1.1).

### Play in Black British Art

As Martin puts it, “resistance and rebellion defined the aesthetic of the age,”<sup>63</sup> and the scholarship around the work of Biswas fits within this framework. Martin emphasizes Biswas' practice as a key feminist intervention in the Black Arts Movement. *Housewives with Steak-Knives* in particular nuances the conventions of Black aesthetics<sup>64</sup> by investing in feminist praxis, made evident in the use of pastels and the mobilization of domestic space. This work, in oil, acrylic, and pastel on paper mounted on canvas, was first exhibited in 1984 at her Leeds University BFA degree show. Thus, just as Biswas was completing her undergraduate training she was already contributing to the reformation of the contemporary British art world. *Housewives with Steak-Knives* was also exhibited in two other shows that were critical to the formation of Black art: *Thin Black Line* (1984), a show curated by Lubaina Himid on the work on five Black British artists who are women (including herself) at the Africa Centre, and *Transforming the Crown* (1997) in New York City at the Caribbean Cultural Center, a show that historicized Black art production during the 1980s as a postcolonial critique. As such, the work is emblematic of the Black Arts Movement.<sup>65</sup> Against a bright white blank background, a larger-than-life character dominates the picture plane. The main and singular subject of the canvas, Biswas'

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<sup>63</sup> Martin, “Cyclones in the Metropole,” 143.

<sup>64</sup> This is especially true against the raw, textual figural, and anti-painting of the BLK art style.

<sup>65</sup> The artwork also appeared on the cover of *Artimage* no. 11 (1985).

“housewife,” is depicted as a potent symbol of female power, a representation that counters conventional representations of women in domestic spaces. More precisely, her multiple arms, dark skin, protruding tongue, necrophilic garland, and bloody weapon render her legible as Kali, the fiercest incarnation of the Hindu goddess. Her unkempt mane and bright red tongue that sticks out of her mouth distinctly mark her as Kali, the wild and untamable goddess. Kali is generally understood not to have a consort, yet Biswas’ version is labeled, “housewife.” Curiously, Biswas’ title for her singular figure is not actually “housewife,” but “housewives,” suggesting an inherent plurality to her main subject. What does it mean to depict Kali as a housewife? Is Biswas suggesting that within housewives there lurks a Kali? Is Biswas seeking to unleash this goddess otherwise repressed within patriarchal (and in this case colonial) ideologies of domestic housewives? In one of her right hands her “steak knife” is not a steak knife at all but takes on the form of a machete, one so massive that it spills out of the top edge of the frame. This machete brings forth the uncontrollable warrior qualities of Kali, and by replacing the steak knife with a machete Biswas conjures the warrior potential of women, repressed by the domestication of their roles.

As warrior, Biswas’ Kali housewife’s target is the abuses of power. Kali’s garland of severed heads usually marks the fate of her mythic enemies, but in Biswas’ version political tyrants symbolize those who represent true evil; the disembodied heads belong to Hitler, Stalin, and former British Conservative Prime Minister Harold Macmillan. Additionally, in Kali’s bottom left hand, the red lotus represents the official symbol for the Hindu fundamentalist political party, the Bharata Janata Party (BJP), and marks their rise to power during the 1980s. Read in conversation with the severed heads, the lotus

pairs well with them – as ideological shorthand that connects abuses of power from the European and Indian Right. Biswas transforms her “housewife into a political warrior goddess equipped with weapons to undermine patriarchal formations for “woman” and, by extension, “goddess” (see chapter three).

And finally, in the same left hand Kali holds a flag with a copy of the famed history painting, *Judith Beheading Holofernes* (1620), by Italian Baroque artist Artemesia Gentileschi (figure 1.2). This insertion forces a conversation between *Housewives with Steak-Knives* and contemporary feminist revisions of art history that highlight marginalized female figures and narratives by calling out the systemic omissions. This juxtaposition engenders a creative exchange between two fierce feminist icons, Kali and Judith, from diverging religious traditions that are rarely if ever discussed together.

Crucially, Biswas’ Kali is not represented as a fierce creature from a mythic past; rather the main subject of *Housewives with Steak-Knives* is a fierce woman firmly situated in the contemporary era. She does not wear a timeless or traditional outfit but a shirt with contemporary designs that expose her armpit hair. This latter detail positions her squarely within a contemporary feminist context that values untrimmed hair as a sign of a body unregulated by patriarchal notions of beauty. Conventionally, Kali represents the destruction of evil, change, and renewal, and Biswas’ contemporary embodiment mirrors this feminine ferocity. However, this juxtaposition between a mythic Kali and contemporary housewife engenders a contemporary Kali that is ultimately disjunctive. Although key iconographic details are present – details evidenced in South Asian



calendar art<sup>66</sup> images of gods and goddesses, for example – this contemporary Kali breaks from historical and popular representations of the goddess that adhere to established visual typologies, rendering Biswas’ depiction dissonant. Generally speaking, Kali’s fierce rendition is a reflection of her character, but, transported into the contemporary moment via her contemporary dress, she is situated out of time. Garlanded by a series of recognizable white male heads, and seen holding BJP symbols, she is also located and mobilized within a specifically political context that is of the moment. This dissonance is key to Biswas’ formal intervention. Out of time, Biswas’ contemporary Kali is also out of place. Several other incarnations of the goddess, such as Sita and Parvati, emulate wifely duties and have served as mythological models for real life domesticity; however, Biswas invokes Kali-as-wife, an intentional inversion given her unconsorted, warrior status and her uncontainable, ferocious will. The artist makes use of Kali-as-wife to invert expectations around gender roles within an Asian context. She disrupts stereotypical notions of Asian women as passive, going against notions of femininity as inherently docile and fragile.<sup>67</sup> This playful and imaginative inversion of servility and militancy liberates the wife-as-signifier, recasting her as an alternative discourse of Black empowerment that is at once uncanny and grotesque. Her oversized eyes, hands, limbs, and musculature, alongside the excessive spillage from her open, cavernous mouth, accentuate a monstrous quality. As a way to make sense of power

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<sup>66</sup> Images of Kali representations in calendar art (chromolithography) are published in Kajri Jain, *Gods in the Bazaar: The Economies of Indian Calendar Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007) and Sumathi Ramaswamy, *The Goddess and the Nation: Mapping Mother India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

<sup>67</sup> This aesthetic decision aligns with the logics of postcolonial feminism, which deconstructs how western feminism frames “Third World women” as a featureless collective icon of oppression. For further elaboration, see Gayatri Spivak, “Imperialism and Sexual Difference,” *Oxford Literary Review* 8 (1986): 225–40; Chandra Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship on Colonial Discourses,” *Feminist Review* 30 (1988): 61–88.

structures, inversion can be a powerful tool of play. Biswas' Kali-wife undoes patriarchal and colonial expectations in and around the contemporary Asian woman. Although the work's title implies a domesticated subject, visual indicators suggest otherwise. Biswas' dialog between image and text, between an unruly goddess and the label "housewife," ultimately undermines both formations.

Significantly, Biswas' inversion draws on a tradition of colonial caricatures of Hindu iconography. Partha Mitter's *Much Maligned Monsters* (1977) examines how the colonial gaze caricaturized their ostensibly ethnographic encounters with the Hindu pantheon, to monstrous effect. In figure 1.3 for example, an image from B. Picart's *Coutumes* (1735), note the way Ganesh is visually translated through a western imagination of ancient Greek paganism: the hooves, goat-like legs, and hairy chest are redolent of hedonistic Pan or Dionysius. These characteristics are also typical of a devilish being. Caricatured images of gods and goddesses are not only common to a western audience but have been historically – misleadingly – absorbed as documentary fact. As Ritu Gairola Khanduri historicizes in *Caricaturing Culture in India* (2014), since the mid-nineteenth century colonial cartoons in the subcontinent have mirrored imperial politics, caricaturing natives via specific tropes such as the use of animals, objects, and gender inversion to translate human activity including religious worship of the gods and goddesses into colonial stereotypes.<sup>68</sup> While these colonial renditions function as an aberration, as caricatures of a long-standing tradition with established typologies – reflecting their own ideological views of Hindu forms as inherently monstrous –

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<sup>68</sup> If, since independence from British rule in 1947, humor has played a critical role in marking colonial modernity, cartoons have figured as a peripheral but critical mode of public communication and politics that inform knowledge production; see Ritu Gairola Khanduri, *Caricaturing Culture in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 26–39.

*Housewives with Steak-Knives* responds by arguably caricaturing these colonial caricatures. Whereas the grotesque and the caricatured have historically been deployed in service of a false ethnography of Hindu gods, the playful inversion and dissonant juxtapositions in *Housewives with Steak-Knives* bring up the historical relationship between otherness and caricature, one that applies to the racist conditions elaborated on above that inform Biswas' work and underpin Black aesthetics in the UK during this period.

Scholars such as Gilane Tawadros, Griselda Pollock, and Martin have published on the aesthetic politics of Biswas' work. Their passionate positions emphasize Biswas' invocation of Kali as a fierce feminist intervention. They treat *Housewives with Steak-Knives* as a resistant counter-image; however, Biswas' dissonant image offers the opportunity to disidentify as well – to invert power dynamics structuring representation. And while some critics observe this disjuncture, they do not necessarily dwell on the impact of playful aesthetics. In “Tracing Figures of Presence, Naming Ciphers of Absence,” Pollock emphasizes how the work of this Indian-born and British-raised artist inflected 1980s feminist aesthetic practice in the UK with a postcolonial critique of a predominantly white postmodernity. Having taught the artist when she was an undergraduate student at Leeds University, she observed firsthand how Biswas recast art-historical scholarship by directly taking on the Fine Art Department's racist blind spots.<sup>69</sup> In the words of Tawadros, *Housewives with Steak-Knives* is Biswas' “clearest

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<sup>69</sup> Though the University of Leeds is renowned for its distinctly Marxist and feminist programs of study (especially under the leading influences of art historians T.J. Clark and Griselda Pollock), students like Biswas represented a well-needed evolution in the Leeds project with regard to her postcolonial critique and art making.

enunciation of the notion of black femininity as a form of creative resistance.”<sup>70</sup> Some critics allude to Biswas’ playfulness, but their analysis is thin. For example, Mora J. Beauchamp-Byrd states that, “*Housewives with Steak Knives*, through mastery of irony and wit, profoundly articulated the Black feminist aesthetic of the period”<sup>71</sup> – however, she does not elaborate on this otherwise generative statement. Similarly, Martin describes *Housewives with Steak-Knives* as a “contemporary satire on black female agency within a deeply art historical context.”<sup>72</sup> Building on these initial observations of Biswas’ irony, wit, and satire, I describe, in greater detail, the texture of her dissonance and inversion. By dwelling differently on her work, I attend to the textures of the aesthetics of oppositionality that “Black” as a new organizing principle did indeed set in motion.

Finally, I am convinced that play is a driving factor in *Housewives with Steak-Knives*, given how the artist describes her own practice some twenty years later. Although discussing an entirely different set of images, filmic stills that re-imagine British colonial landscape, her conviction around the role of play in her work reads as a characterization of her broader aesthetic ethos. When discussing *Birdsong* (2004) her 16mm film, she notes the following: “this sense of play is so important. It has driven me, actually. The absolutely ridiculous notion of a horse being in your lived space is insane, but it’s no more insane than the story of Peter Pan or the work of Edward Lear, or acts of

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<sup>70</sup> Gilane Tawadros, “Beyond the Boundary: the Work of Three Black Women Artists in Britain,” in *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader*, ed. Houston A. Baker et al. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 296.

<sup>71</sup> Mora J. Beauchamp-Byrd, “London Bridge: Late Twentieth Century British Art and the Routes of ‘National Culture,’” in *Transforming the Crown: African, Asian & Caribbean Artists in Britain, 1966–1996*, ed. Mora J. Beauchamp-Byrd and Franklin Sirmans (New York: Franklin H. Williams Caribbean Cultural Center/African Diaspora Institute, 1997), 29.

<sup>72</sup> Martin, “Cyclones in the Metropole,” 141.

cultural domination” (figure 1.4).<sup>73</sup> She continues, “Play makes so many things possible. If you allow that magical dream space to exist, even for a moment, if you get back under the table with a child to play, it makes so much possible.”<sup>74</sup> By reading cultural domination through the ridiculous, she demonstrates how her aesthetic intentions stretch beyond voicing outrage, instead valuing an evocation grounded in the outrageous. These aspects have become more explicit in her recent work, but given the unexamined playfulness of *Housewives with Steak-Knives*, by way of inversion and dissonance, I source her attention to play in her contributions to the Black Arts Movement.

Another major work pertaining to Black art in the UK, vis-à-vis the emergence of South Asian diasporic art production, is Rasheed Araeen’s billboard installation *The Golden Verses* (1990). Given Araeen’s political militancy, the framing of his visual practices coincides with the dominant narrative around Black art as primarily confrontational. Martin views works like his 1977 live performance, *Paki Bastard* (*Portrait of the Artist as a Black Person*), first presented at the Artists for Democracy (a space that supports experimental art), as a demonstration of his commitment to art as an oppositional strategy. More to the point, Martin locates his aesthetic intervention, not in *Paki Bastard*’s narrativization of politicized lived experience but in the integral role Araeen’s body plays in enacting “an aestheticized chronicle of Araeen’s radicalism” as “a reaction to restrictive national and local measures.”<sup>75</sup> Further, she pays special attention to the way the artist’s body, as medium and not merely as content, is integral to

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<sup>73</sup> Stephanie Snyder, “An Exchange: In Conversation with Sutapa Biswas,” in *Sutapa Biswas* (London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 2004), 10.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Martin, “Cyclones in the Metropole,” 75.

understanding how the performance hinges on destruction.<sup>76</sup> In “The Artist as Post-Colonial Subject and this Individual’s Journey Towards ‘the Centre’” Araeen himself notes how from the early 1980s onwards aspects of his practice relied at least in part on methodologies of deconstruction, involving parody, irony, and sarcasm.<sup>77</sup> And although he does not further explicate why this particular aesthetic strategy resonated with him, nor does he elaborate on its impact, it is important to mark his aesthetic intentions, which have shifted over the decades.<sup>78</sup> I do so to evidence my claims about his work and, more crucially, to mark the consequences that ensued when his ironic and sarcastic tone was radically misunderstood.

Measuring 3 x 6 meters, Araeen’s *The Golden Verses* is a billboard print poster of calligraphic writing, or “stereotypical representations of Islamic culture in western culture” (figure 1.5).<sup>79</sup> Superimposing Urdu onto an image of an oriental carpet, the three lines of text in the middle of the carpet explicitly name white people as the subject of the artwork, but intentionally in a language that very few white people understand. An English translation is available, albeit cleverly woven in the external decorative border of

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>77</sup> Rasheed Araeen, “The Artist as a Post-Colonial Subject and this Individual’s Journey Towards ‘the Centre,’” in *Views of Difference: Different Views of Art*, ed. Catherine King (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 249.

<sup>78</sup> Araeen first began creating experimental work in architecture, painting, and sculpture while still studying civil engineering in Karachi. In 1964, when he left Pakistan for Europe, eventually settling in London, he quickly became fascinated with producing minimalist structures that challenged prevailing concepts in modernist sculpture – crucially, *before* the movement, Minimalism, became familiar to Britain. And yet, despite Araeen’s unique contributions, his work has not been historicized as part of this historical aesthetic development in art history. Eventually he had to make the hard decision of leaving his minimalist structures, whose aesthetic breadth could not account for the multiplicity of his experiences in the UK. Confronted with the institutional racism of the British art establishment, Araeen took up a more radical position, and by the 1970s his art became more overtly political; his turn to parody, irony, and sarcasm is a part of this shift.

<sup>79</sup> Araeen, “The Artist as a Post-Colonial Subject,” 249.

the carpet and thus camouflaged, while the phrase, “The Golden Verses” is visible at the bottom border in English. The translation of Araeen’s central text reads as follows:

White people are very good people. They have very white and soft skin.

Their hair is golden and their eyes are blue. Their civilisation is the best

civilisation. In their countries they live life with love and affection. And

there is no racial discrimination whatsoever. White people are very good

people.<sup>80</sup>

Most non-Urdu reading people encountering the work of art assumed that the text referred to “golden verses” from the Qur’an. Indeed, as an art piece that plays on the dissonance between signifiers, the work was (in)famous for confusing many, the consequences of which were stark, if not violent.

*The Golden Verses* was installed in several sites in London, predominantly in areas with large Asian populations, and then later in Cleveland, in Potsdam near Berlin in Germany, and in Minneapolis. While the work received little press attention in London, just two days after its posting, one of the billboards in a predominantly South Asian neighborhood in the East End was vandalized and left with two large holes. Araeen suspects that an Asian group who could read the text but who missed its sarcastic tone instigated the violence. At another site nearby, the billboard was partially covered with anti-racist flyers. And, at a site near Victoria Station, the work was defaced with graffiti signed by the National Front stating, “what’s it all about Bongo!” – a derogatory term

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<sup>80</sup> Araeen repurposed this text from his *Ethnic Drawings* (1982), a series of four drawings on cardboard mostly composed of a self-portrait and Urdu calligraphy. This repurposing speaks to the role of parody in his practice; see Iftikhar Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 191.

referring to non-white communities from former British colonies, Black African populations in particular. In Germany, neo-Nazis spray-painted a swastika sign on the image; instead of finding the culprits, local authorities blamed the organizers as provocateurs and took away the billboard. In Cleveland, an Asian group defaced the work with blue paint and Urdu writing that read “white people are bastards,” and eventually set fire to the billboard. Only in Minneapolis, where the work was mostly out of reach, suspended in the air in a shopping mall, was *The Golden Verses* not vandalized.<sup>81</sup>

Some scholars emphasize the conditions that instigated this confused and in some instances violent reception, and I build on their thoughts by focusing on how and why Araeen’s sarcasm was missed. By dwelling on this missed opportunity, I aim to articulate an elision of play in *The Golden Verses*, an elision that is emblematic of a limited aesthetic understanding of art during this period. In the final chapter of *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia* (2010), Iftikhar Dadi contextualizes *The Golden Verses* as an expression of Araeen’s public self. The chapter marks a mid- to late-twentieth century shift in art production – where inward conceptualizations of postcolonial subjectivities evolve into contestations that present themselves more outwardly. For Dadi, Araeen’s work directly engages with the social: with the urban realm given its installation locations, and with popular culture given its format. In inciting an interaction with the public and thus in critically intervening with the public, the work is set up to “powerfully underscore aporias of the self and the social.”<sup>82</sup> For Dadi, Araeen’s public self is a self-critical one. Created in the wake of the Rushdie Affair, Araeen’s chosen title parodies

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<sup>81</sup> Pennina Barnett, “Rugs R Us (*and Them*): The Oriental Carpet as Sign and Text,” *Third Text* 30 (Spring 1995): 13–28.

<sup>82</sup> Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia*, 177.



that of Salman Rushdie's controversial magical realist novel *The Satanic Verses* (1989). Many judged the novel as blasphemous and the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the supreme leader of Iran, issued a fatwa – an order to all Muslims to kill Rushdie. The affair divided those in favor of freedom of expression from those faithful to the belief that insulting the Prophet is sinful. However, the shadow of shame that the affair cast on Islam inspired many British Muslims to speak up, thereby shifting the public image of British Muslims from stereotypically silent, well-behaved minorities to activist, anti-racist, and emancipatory citizens of a more self-consciously pluralist society.<sup>83</sup> Thus for Dadi, “the emergent public Muslim selfhood in the wake of injuries of the ‘Rushdie Affair’ requires persistent self-critique of its formation rather than developing a dangerous and false perception regarding its own authenticity and victimhood.”<sup>84</sup> He evidences his point by focusing on the billboard as a generative site given the public nature of the medium. A stock motif placed at a site reserved for advertising, *The Golden Verses* makes a quintessentially postmodern gesture by avoiding “the hard sell of either commercial or political rhetoric.”<sup>85</sup>

Ziauddin Sardar and Pennina Barnett focus on how the work evokes signs and images that reflect white perceptions of the self and the other. In the article “Rugs R Us,” Barnett argues that *The Golden Verses* “weave[s] [...] signifiers with pre-existent meaning”<sup>86</sup> to synthesize something new and unexpected. If the Islamic carpet immediately places the billboard and its message within the Orient imaginary, then the

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<sup>83</sup> Pennina Werbner, *Imagined Diasporas Among Manchester Muslims: The Public Performance of Pakistani Transnational Identity Politics* (Oxford: James Currey, 2002), 258–259.

<sup>84</sup> Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia*, 195.

<sup>85</sup> Guy Brett, “Abstract Activist,” *Art in America* (February, 1998): 84.

<sup>86</sup> Barnett, “Rugs R Us (and Them),” 25.

Urdu script, incomprehensible to most, represents the “irrational other.” Bearing this in mind, “what does such an ‘alien’ billboard say to the passing public? Is it totally meaningless because it does not ‘speak’ to them?”<sup>87</sup> Sardar argues that *The Golden Verses* “evokes and erases the Orientalist stereotype.”<sup>88</sup> He continues:

It uses the conventional images of the Other to draw its audiences in; then it slaps them with total silence and incomprehensibility. It speaks to its western audience by reflecting their prejudices of the Other back to them and then it makes them feel like the Others [...] feel; dumbfounded. It declares its pride in the continuation of Islamic tradition – both calligraphy and carpet weaving are dynamic, thriving traditions – yet, it has more to say about the West than about the Other. Its inaccessibility masks a silenced voice and advertises the absence of space for the Other. With its deliberate play on Orientalism, its ironic comment on western civilization, and its conscious use of postmodern conventions (a billboard on a commercial site that sells nothing, an authentic carpet that is a clear copy, seeking to represent the Other while making the Other incomprehensible), “The Golden Verses” attempts to reveal the truly epic nature of the postmodern enterprise.<sup>89</sup>

This passage speaks to how Araeen’s irony and sarcasm transform the carpet as sign into a text with upending resonance and Sardar characterizes this intervention as a

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<sup>87</sup> Ziauddin Sardar, *Postmodernism and the Other: The New Imperialism of Western Culture* (London: Pluto Press, 1998), 164.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 165.

quintessentially postmodern move. For Araeen though, *The Golden Verses* confronts us with the stereotypes we have of each other. While turning orientalized tropes on their head, the work also deploys stereotypical images of white people (i.e. as blond and blue-eyed). In Araeen's words, the "work is not about white people, neither merely a sarcastic representation of them (as understood by critics), nor a praise of white people (as understood by some Asians)."<sup>90</sup> The work engages stereotypes within western culture: of otherness *and* whiteness. The crucial difference of course rests in the power dynamic at play; stereotypes of the other have been used to contain them in a suspended state, while the image whiteness has created for itself serves an imperial function that differentiates the colonizer from the colonized.<sup>91</sup> *The Golden Verses* destabilizes this imposed perception, or at least was meant to.

Setting postmodern indifference aside, it is important to note that the ways in which different communities emotionally struck by the piece and emboldened to vandalize it dominate the reception of the work. In this way, Araeen's purpose in stirring his audience runs deeper than semiotics. The public platform created a spotlight that hit too close to home on either end of the reception spectrum. As a result, the billboard was received as a violating presence. On the one hand, the work reminded immigrant Pakistani communities of the pervasive systemic racism they face in Britain; their blind spot to Araeen's sarcastic tone reflected "their own psychic colonization."<sup>92</sup> Yet, on the other, the billboard simultaneously challenged white nationalists violently threatened by the work's "Islamic look." Their violence was motivated by ignorance and stereotypical

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<sup>90</sup> Araeen, "The Artist as a Post-Colonial Subject," 251.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 252.

<sup>92</sup> Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia*, 195.

assumption, whereas Asians were triggered by the billboard and reacted with violence in response to the violence of Araeen's words (if read in earnest). Both these contradictory positions – the racist perspective and the position of those affected by racism – stifle the success of the work's most upending element. However, like Biswas, Araeen is not only invested in merely producing a counter-image, but in creating an undermining one.

The missed opportunity of Araeen's intended sarcasm reflects just how unstable and opened-ended the process of signification actually is. His use of irony illuminates how encounters with the untranslatable are fragile. Furthermore, the missed joke embodies the very real hostilities between communities, hostilities so serious that each group was unable to see past its own prejudices; whereas seeing past would allow *The Golden Verses* to be valued as a rich public forum for poking fun at the stereotypes different communities have of another other. But that is not how the work was received, and this is key. The way in which Araeen's billboard has been (mis)-received is grounded in its illegibility and the inevitable effect of the work, the incapability to encounter its aesthetic playfulness due to personal bias, reflects the broader limits and failures of a society plagued by racialized discord. I discuss the aesthetic playfulness of failure in chapter two, on the work of Sunil Gupta, and again when I analyze Brendan Fernandes' work in chapter four. That Araeen's sarcasm failed to hit its mark also speaks to the primacy of certain conceptions of race and racism versus others during this period. That is to say, racism is a serious systemic injustice that needs to be dismantled; however, this dismantling does not necessitate a confrontational stance that parallels a more activist opposition. Aesthetically speaking, artworks can offer multiple modes of opposition that

do not simply resist but gesture towards undoing power dynamics. Aesthetic playfulness broadens how one can politically react.

Although the critical reception of *The Golden Verses* recognizes its parodic style and sarcastic tone, the full political impact of the work is contingent on the audience getting the joke. Yet the work was vandalized on multiple counts precisely because it did not; the violence articulates the consequences of not getting the joke, or, put another way, the power of play when it is in fact recognized *and* misrecognized. This moment is crucial to my point around unexamined play. The impact of play has not been considered in an exhaustive way within the framing of the emergence of South Asian diasporic art, and yet, play *has* been an integral part of art making in the Age of Identity. A scholar like Martin has made moves towards an aesthetic analysis of Black British art, of which the South Asian diasporic emergence is an essential part. Building on her contributions, my analysis of works by Biswas and Araeen demonstrates the political import of aesthetic analysis and my emphasis on their under-examined playfulness reshapes the emergence of South Asian diasporic art in the UK. In the following section, which assesses the emergence of South Asian diasporic art in New York City during the next decade, I continue my intervention.

#### New York City, 1990s

Organizing under the term “Black,” a critical mass of non-white artists in the UK, most significantly in London, envisioned a common political identity for themselves that aimed to call out the hegemonic whiteness of the art establishment. South Asians in the

UK played a major role in engendering a progressive politics for “Blackness,” and by extension, a Black aesthetic grounded in social change. Although South Asian immigration history charts another path within the US, in a comparable vein, racial consciousness emerging out of the South Asian diaspora in New York City during the 1990s was influenced, in part, by these anti-racist collectives and underground arts spaces in London since the 1970s.<sup>93</sup> As Jeff Yang remembers in the edited anthology *Local/Express*, the first and only publication to historicize Asian American community arts in New York City during the 1990s, “a startling array of offbeat, outspoken, and idealistic Asian American artists, activists, entrepreneurs, and organizers [...] converged on New York City in the ’90s.”<sup>94</sup> Unlike West Coast cities like San Francisco and Los Angeles, Asian American scenes in New York City were “less established, less connected, and less secure,” resulting in a “tenor and texture [that] was more dynamic and diverse. It was raw, noisy, authentic, spontaneous, informal, uninhibited, defiant.”<sup>95</sup> Furthermore, as “people became active in a pan-Asian network,” in Parag Khandhar’s words, “they represented communities stepping forward out of the anonymity of New York to be named as part of the fabric and character of this city.”<sup>96</sup> He continues, “created over shared meals, revolutionary arguments, crushing setbacks, frantic scholarship, thoughtful protests, joyful expression, resounding victories, and countless

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<sup>93</sup> For more on South Asian migration history to the US, see Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996); Vivek Bald, *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013); Vivek Bald, *The Sun Never Sets: South Asian Migrants in an Age of US Power* (New York: New York University Press, 2013); Scott Ingram, *South Asian Americans* (Milwaukee: World Almanac Library, 2007); Nayan Shah, *Stranger Intimacy: Contesting Race, Sexuality, and the Law in the North American West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Erika Lee, *The Making of Asian America: A History* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015).

<sup>94</sup> Jeff Yang, “The Torchbearers: How a Bunch of ’90s Kids Reinvented New York, Asian America – and Themselves,” in Chin, *Local/Express*, 5.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>96</sup> Parag Khandhar, “Local Expressions,” in Chin, *Local/Express*, 283.

nights in the swirl of it all,”<sup>97</sup> a cultural renaissance emerged that was deeply connected to a sense of community. It was this sense of the interpersonal that fed a sense of possibility in the arts.

Within this context, the category “South Asian American” emerged as a political term. That is to say, unlike terms like “Indian American” or “Pakistani American,” which are descriptive in their reference to cultural heritage, “South Asian American” is a political interpellation that is based on a sense of solidarity across multiple histories of oppression and multiple migration narratives across geographic borders. These connections aim to generate dialogue around the identity formation of South Asians in the US, but also from Africa, the Caribbean and other diasporic communities located in predominantly white contexts such as North America, Europe, and Australia. Eschewing a definition of the diaspora as groups of people bonded by a common language, land, or blood, “South Asian American” as a reformulation calls upon “counter-traditions of grassroots organizing to envision a heterogeneous community committed to the practice of crafting solidarity across differences.”<sup>98</sup> In this way, “South Asian American” is not necessarily a self-evident naming but is historically contingent on the “debates and conversations that engendered the term.”<sup>99</sup>

During the 1990s, a redefinition of South Asian American as a political category took place largely as a reaction to the over-determination of the term “model minority.” The designation “model minority” has its roots in the Hart-Celler Act of 1965, a pivotal moment in South Asian American immigration legal history. The need for technical and

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 286.

<sup>98</sup> Sudhakar, “Conditional Futures,” 3.

<sup>99</sup> Sudhakar, “Conditional Futures,” 16.

medical workers in the US brought about the civil rights era law, which relaxed previously stringent quotas on non-European immigration and prioritized Asian immigrants with skilled backgrounds in technology, science, and medicine. Labor needs restructured migration patterns in the US, and Asian Americans soon became newly visible as an upwardly mobile class. It is this (skewed) image of the financially successful rising Asian American middle class that has come to embody the idea of the model minority. Strategically, the success story of the model minority celebrates individual enterprise and social advancement in a way that dangerously eclipses the effects of systemic racism. Thus the designation “model minority” evades structural inequality by suggesting that historically oppressed groups can overcome racism through mere desire and determination for economic advancement. Emblematic of US race relations during the latter half of the twentieth century, the model minority myth has been used as an excuse to divest from a race analysis, and, more specifically, has been used against other communities of color, such as Indigenous, African American, and Latino communities, without accounting for widely varying histories of encounter, dispossession, and displacement.<sup>100</sup>

Additionally, by the 1990s the South Asian diaspora in New York City had transformed in a way that required a South Asian American re-imagination, one that inevitably countered the model minority myth, or that the designation could no longer

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<sup>100</sup> It is important to note that non-progressive members of the South Asian diaspora have perpetuated the model minority myth as well: for example, community newspapers like *India Abroad* whose story headings prioritize specific kinds of success stories, such as those in education, science, and business only; Indian American political commentator Dinesh D’Souza and his neoconservative rhetoric against such platforms like affirmative action and welfare reform; and the narratives of commercially popular authors such as Jhumpa Lahiri, whose nostalgia for the homeland flattens the immigrant condition. See Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formations in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994) for more on anti-blackness within Asian American communities.



contain. Needless to say, public discourse around diasporic visibility became fragmented. The “children of ’65” were coming of age – having recently graduated from high school and college – as a critical mass; and they were a young, ambitious, energetic, and progressive group who, in New York City, found themselves “steeped in the striver ethics of our hard-working parents, but rebelling against the burden of expectations they’d placed on our shoulders.”<sup>101</sup> But, “overeducated and underemployed,”<sup>102</sup> this group did something else entirely than submit to conventional expectations of attending college to become doctors, lawyers, and engineers – like “good” model minorities. Additionally, from a mainly middle-class population of Indian professionals to a community that included new kinds of migrants from South Asia from different economic backgrounds, the South Asian diaspora became newly visibly in the urban service sector in blue-collar industries, as taxi drivers, construction workers, and convenience store clerks. As this first wave of post-1965 immigrants came together with the group of more recently arrived immigrants (taxi drivers and domestic workers but also international college and graduate students), together they incited multiple platforms of social change. This “double ‘second generation’”<sup>103</sup> – the children of immigrants and young international students who would become the first authors and/or subjects of the first wave of Asian American Studies – rewrote in a paradigmatic way how political identity within the diaspora is conceived. Together they called out cultural preservation as an exclusivist goal that denied the existence of poverty and that silenced various forms of violence, including domestic abuse and homophobia, in the South Asian community. Paying

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<sup>101</sup> Yang, “The Torchbearers,” 5.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

attention to these shifts in demographics and political consciousness, scholars have reshaped the diasporic imagination in an attempt to diffuse the elitist, masculinist, and homophobic versions of South Asian culture in diaspora that have fed the model minority myth.<sup>104</sup>

To quote a phrase coined by Madhulika Khandelwal, an “invisible college”<sup>105</sup> of subversive knowledge production ensued. It rose up around several key events that shaped the political climate and that lent an urgency to resisting. For example, in New Jersey, the Dotbusters, a white nationalist group, targeted and violently harassed members of the South Asian community.<sup>106</sup> Throughout the 1990s, the South Asian Lesbian and Gay Association (SALGA) was denied the right to participate in New York City’s India Day Parade. Activists responded by organizing an anti-parade site of protest, exposing the homophobia of nation-based cultural and heritage organizers. Developing a set of political commitments in the US, South Asian American politics were also grounded in ongoing struggles on the subcontinent: so local phenomena such as the Dotbusters and SALGA’s tensions with the India Day parade were held in conversation with the rise of the Hindu Right in India, especially in the advent of the Babri Mosque

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<sup>104</sup> In addition to Sudhakar, “Conditional Futures,” see Vijay Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); Monica Das Gupta, *Unruly Immigrants: Rights, Activism, and Transnational South Asian Politics in the United States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Bakirathi Mani, *Aspiring to Home: South Asians in America* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012); Prashad, *Uncle Swami: South Asians in America Today* (New York: New Press, 2012); Vanita Reddy, *Fashioning Diaspora: Beauty, Femininity, and South Asian American Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2016).

<sup>105</sup> Madhulika Khandelwal, *Becoming American, Being Indian: an Immigrant Community in New York City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), xi.

<sup>106</sup> A succession of anti-South Asian hate crimes that erupted in middle-class, post-industrial suburbs in New Jersey and Queens, NY (the most notorious among them being the Dotbusters) throughout 1980s and 1990s incited a reactive solidarity that promoted the anti-racism and immigrant rights movement, inspiring coalition and consciousness around a wider history of racial violence in the US.

demolition in Ayodhya, India in 1992. These religious riots were instigated primarily between Hindus and Muslims, with more than 4,000 casualties over the course of a few months. By linking such race-based violence in the US to communal violence in the subcontinent, the South Asian American community made connections between the legacies of empire both in settler US and postcolonial nationalist South Asia, enabling and requiring an intersectional understanding of identity, never quite conceived before in this way.

Indeed, South Asian America emerged out of a “cauldron of race and class issues.”<sup>107</sup> Several initiatives within the non-profit sector flourished during this time, some of which continue to thrive. For example, the queer South Asian organization SALGA served two main purposes: as a response to the cultural and racial shortcomings of the mostly white LGBT mainstream and to the homophobia many encountered within the immigrant communities that raised them. Though no longer running, Youth Solidarity Summer (YSS) organized several annual week-long retreats for college-aged South Asian American activists, which offered a unique opportunity for like-minded peers to develop and hone their political lens within a very specific context. Other initiatives included Workers’ Awaaz, a domestic worker’s advocacy group; the South Asian taxi union, the Leaser Driver’s Coalition; publications like the radical periodical *South Asian Magazine for Action and Reflection* (SAMAR); Mutiny and DJ Rekha’s monthly community parties, Basement Bhangra, which served as a safe space for socializing; and cultural

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<sup>107</sup> Sudhakar, “Conditional Futures,” 10.

The technological revolution that was simultaneously occurring (in and around the advent of the Internet) played a major role in shaping this generation’s mindset and identity. As things like the cheaply available computers, the mobile phone, desktop publishing, and the birth of the Internet emerged, the need for an organizational center no longer became necessary. “Suddenly anyone could start of organization or launch a campaign, found a magazine or zine and hundreds did” (Yang, “The Torchbearers,” 5).

events and festivals with queer political and aesthetic orientation like Diasporadics (and Desh Pardesh in Toronto, which attracted a number of folks from New York City). Importantly, chapter three focuses on Chitra Ganesh, who was an active member in YSS, SALGA, and the South Asian Women's Creative Collective (SAWCC). Among these initiatives, SAWCC stands out as a space exclusively designed for artists during a time when very little was known about South Asian diasporic art. Anish Kapoor was the most visible South Asian artist at the time, but his art making was not committed to a South Asian American political re-imagination, whereas artists like Zarina Hashmi, Shazia Sikander, and Rina Banerjee were making art but would not gain mainstream recognition in the art world until later. Given this lack of exposure, SAWCC provided networking opportunities, financial support through grants, and greater visibility through annual exhibitions in commercial galleries and eventually in museums as well. Many artists would exhibit for the first time in New York City due to the connections they fostered through the collective. SAWCC became a way to gather the masses and create a community forum for discussion about the intersection of art and politics. In March 1997, when artist and SAWCC founder Jaishri Abichandani convened the first SAWCC meeting, fourteen women of diverse ages and sexualities attended, and through old-school methods of organizing such as phone trees and Xeroxed newsletters the organization would grow immensely, to the point where it now boasts over 1,000 members online.

In comparison to the UK during the 1980s, not only has there been less scholarship around the South Asian diasporic emergence in New York City, but there is also less critical distance between the contemporary moment and the 1990s. While

exhibitions by Margo Machida and Melissa Chiu such *Asia/America* (1994) and *One Way or Another* (2006) have put Asian American art on the map, they have subordinated contributions that work through South Asian American contexts. By contrast, *Fatal Love: South Asian American Art Now* (2005) visually marks how this community imagined an alternative social history. Curated by Jaishri Abichandani and Prerana Reddy, (SAWCC board member and Queens Museum of Art director of public relations), *Fatal Love* represents the first exhibition dedicated to contemporary South Asian American art hosted by a major institution. The show brought together twenty-eight international and immigrant artists from various parts of South Asia (with a focus on India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal), mostly young women living in New York and affiliated with SAWCC. The list of artists included well-established practitioners as well as emerging talents, working in various media such as photography, mixed-media, video, web-based, and installation. In a review, Holland Cotter notes how “some, like Rina Banerjee and Shahzia Sikander, are by now woven into the city’s art-world fabric. Others, like Chitra Ganesh, surely will be [whose] work, from wall drawings to photography, is maturing before our eyes. It’s exciting to see.”<sup>108</sup> His reviews often gloss contemporary South Asian art for the *New York Times* without much depth, though his prescient vision for Ganesh here (as chapter three evidences) is noteworthy.

The show represented the Queens Museum’s attempt to depart from mainstream approaches that conventionally emphasize cultural initiatives stemming out of India in South Asian studies. In the past, shows like, *Out of India: Art of the South Asian Diaspora* (1997), also at the Queens Museum, featured artists from the Indian diaspora

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<sup>108</sup> Holland Cotter, “Taking a Magical Flight Through Modern India,” *New York Times*, March 4, 2005.

on a global scale but failed to illuminate how the diaspora can be mobilized as a productive space that negotiates the multiplicity of borders and communal relations in South Asia beyond marginalized representation. While *Out of India* made several links between international urban locations and the diasporic trajectories that have informed their art making, *Fatal Love* reflected interpersonal solidarities of an intimate community of artists. *Fatal Love* also distinguished itself from *Edge of Desire*, a show about contemporary Indian art that premiered the same year and was hosted by the Queens Museum and the Asia Society. They were largely seen as sister shows; however as artist and activist Naeem Mohaiemen maintains, *Fatal Love*'s curatorial vision is firmly situated against the blockbuster show as a "rebuke"<sup>109</sup> to India-centric narrowness. Instead, *Fatal Love* represented the community's attempt to challenge homogenous representations and redefine itself as a political category at the intersections of various postcolonial and anti-racist histories. Although community art is often critiqued for not transcending its cultural boundaries, *Fatal Love* challenged these imposed politics of representation by intentionally revealing the plurality of South Asian American art production. In his essay in the exhibition's catalog, Vijay Prasad's views on South Asian diasporic affiliation are illuminating: "despite the national differences and animosities that rankle the sub-continent, those who find descent there but live here recognize that we have far more in common than we are allowed to imagine."<sup>110</sup> Thus rather than showcase a blind allegiance to nationalist heritage, *Fatal Love* takes this affective kinship as its

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<sup>109</sup> Naeem Mohaiemen, "When an Interpreter Could not be Found," in *The Sun Never Sets: South Asian Migrants in the Age of US Power*, ed. Vivek Bald (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 229.

<sup>110</sup> Prasad, "Indo-Pak-Bangla," in *Fatal Love: South Asian American Art Now*, exhibition catalog (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 2005), 7.

point of departure and enacts the intimate encounters at the heart of this burgeoning community.

A number of artworks focused on a shared sense of history, personal narrative, and critical utopias while imagining other possibilities beyond the status quo. For example, select artworks meditated on the impact of 9/11 on the South Asian communities. As a historical trauma mostly framed as the worst act of foreign terrorism since Pearl Harbor, for most brown bodies, 9/11 amplified the consequences of living in the shadows of US imperialism. The tragic events of 9/11 were immediately accompanied by a propagandizing sense of fear and intimidation, thereby inaugurating the twenty-first century with a new racial order couched in Islamophobia; in addition to increased surveillance, detention, and deportation, hate crimes escalated and racial violence became routine for a broad group of South Asians, Arabs, and Muslims. And while 9/11 marked a rupture in time with an autonomous periodizing force, the division that characterized the post-9/11 political climate also represents an intensification of more of the same.<sup>111</sup> Conflated with the menacing image of the terrorist, everyday racism targeted Muslim, South Asian, and Arab bodies as suspect, and these bodies were made into hypervisible objects requiring racial containment – a political shift certainly, but one that actually follows a lengthy lineage of discipline and retribution used to control and police immigrant populations.<sup>112</sup> Amidst systemic efforts to quell the dissenting voices of the “children of ’65” though, artists demanded accountability around exploitative forces

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<sup>111</sup> Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), xviii; also see Puar, “Introduction,” in *Terrorist Assemblages*, footnote #15.

<sup>112</sup> See the introduction of Bald, *The Sun Never Sets*, and Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*.

such as colonialism, gentrification, and labor rights, from the white mainstream as well as from hegemonic, India-centric and Hindu nationalist ideologies.

While the show evidenced the importance of artists coming together in solidarity, and deliberating over what it meant to be part of a community in the here and now, *Fatal Love* evaded an in-depth conversation on artistic form. In foregrounding artwork premised on an aesthetics of visibility, opposition, and solidarity, *Fatal Love* did not go far enough in challenging the politics of representation emblematic of this time period. Sudhakar's study represents the first attempt to comprehensively approach the impact of aesthetic output within the South Asian diaspora. Yet her focus on an aesthetics of utopian possibility in collective solidarity – like Martin and her work on Black British aesthetics – mirrors the political conditions from which these artistic practices emerge. As with other scholars historicizing art production and aesthetics in the British context, other elements of dissent, those that do not parallel lived experience, have not been properly excavated – like the subversiveness of aesthetic play. And so, bearing in mind the role aesthetic analysis has in undermining the packaging of the visual culture of difference, what roles does an aesthetics of play, more precisely, have in this undermining? There are in fact a number of examples in the show that exhibit a comparable aesthetic grounded in playfulness; and, whereas the exhibition catalog references some of these more playful aesthetic interventions, it does not elaborate on the impact of play as an aesthetic strategy or political gesture. For example, the catalog describes Annu Palakunnathu Matthew as an artist who is known for creating “humorous though politically pointed appropriation of Bollywood film posters that question Indian



nationalist communalisms and sexism.”<sup>113</sup> Note the use of the word “though” here, which frames humor and the political as mutually exclusive. On more than one occasion humor is pegged against politics, as in the following statement about Ela Shah’s work: “while sculptures might appear comical or humorous at first they address religious, political and cultural issues [...]”<sup>114</sup> Anna Bhushan’s work is described as sensual, magical, and tragic in addition to comical, yet the formal details of the latter are not treated as an aesthetic strategy worthy of further deliberation. Instead, the comical is treated as a mere adjective – one of many. This treatment of humor as apolitical and as purely descriptive rather than as a strategic agent that reshapes the politics of South Asian diasporic art making is precisely what the rest of the chapters in this dissertation challenge.

For the remainder of the chapter, I focus on a single work of art in *Fatal Love* that invests in play as an aesthetically political strategy but that has not been primarily understood as such. As the title of the art installation by New York City-based artist, Sa’dia Rehman, suggests, *Lotah Stories* (2005) has been primarily understood as a work that engages closeted personal narratives about bathroom practices. While this framing is not entirely inaccurate, this particular focus overlooks other elements motivating Rehman’s aesthetic labor, such as the irreverence of bathroom practices. As water vessels or containers used to wash oneself upon using the toilet, lotahs are considered an alternative and/or complement to toilet paper. In the words of Bushra Rehman’s, the artist’s sister and a fiction writer in her own right, lotahs “look like teapots without covers and are made of metal or plastic. With one hand, you pour the water and with the other,

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<sup>113</sup> Prerana Reddy, “Creating a South Asian Contemporary: Reflections of the Past, Dissections of the Present, Complexions of the Future,” in *Fatal Love*, 24.

<sup>114</sup> Ela Shah, “Artists in Exhibition,” in *Fatal Love*, 56.

you wash yourself clean.”<sup>115</sup> Lotahs are commonplace in South Asia and among immigrant populations who have transported these hygiene practices with them. However, symptomatic of assimilative pressures, many transition to toilet paper and feel discouraged to use lotahs, especially in public. Rehman’s installation picks up on these anxieties by focusing on “a secret society” of “closeted lotah users” – those “who refuse to cross over.”<sup>116</sup>

Upon entering the bathrooms, museum visitors expect a break from the carefully curated gallery spaces of the Queens Museum. And yet, whether waiting in line or washing one’s hands, patrons were playfully reminded that they were still, to their surprise, engaging with *Fatal Love*. Nuzzled in window niches, Rehman’s display of plastic lotahs hang from the ceiling as a cluster (figure 1.6).<sup>117</sup> She purchased the containers, which came in different colors, patterns, and designs, in one of the largest South Asian immigrant communities in North America, Jackson Heights, Queens. She converted these functional objects into a work of art by covering the lotahs in collaged paper cut up from water-bottle labels. The significance of these labels, legible only to a select few who are “in the know,” is worth unpacking: they signal how water bottles are used as makeshift lotahs, or as lotahs-in-disguise, since water bottles are more inconspicuous and thus more ideal, especially for public use. The makeshift quality of the labels breaks the smooth surface of the original lotahs. They also flatten the ornate differences between the varying models. As anti-aesthetic art objects, they stand in

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<sup>115</sup> Bushra Rehman, “Our Little Secrets: a Pakistani Artist Explores the Shame and Pride of her Community’s Bathroom Practices,” in *Ladies and Gents: Public Toilets and Gender*, ed. Olga Gershenson and Barbara Penner (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), 190.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 191.

contrast to the rest of the show, which featured more conventional media (photography, video and works on paper), while mirroring the crassness of its in-situ location in the bathroom.

*Lotah Stories* is not only an art installation but a community oral history project as well that juxtaposes shameful, funny, and absurd tales about immigrant toilet practices as a way to illuminate assimilation pressures while redesigning the unmentionables of personal care. Rehman's collaged objects includes audio recording that loops stories by lotah users. Rehman turned disclosed secrets into an installation of community art making. Thus, as museum visitors use private stalls and presumably put into practice their personal hygienic ethics, they aurally encounter *Lotah Stories*. This aesthetic encounter, simultaneous to live practice, enacts a moment that is either an interpellative or a dissonant experience. While some narratives are funny, other disclosures are riddled with shame; most however function to blur the lines between the two. Upon gathering personal narratives, the artist recalls how she was often met with relief. Friends, fellow artists, and even strangers interviewed with the artist in the streets, in cafes, and their homes, more than happy to "finally talk about their lotahs."<sup>118</sup> Many were nervous, but more were excited to share their stories – feeling freed in some capacity. The process was comparable to a coming out narrative. Bushra notes how the profound shame felt by the interviewees surprised her alongside the measures they would take to hide their lotahs from co-workers, roommates, even live-in partners. "There was this strange realization of how deep this need for assimilation is in the narratives,"<sup>119</sup> says the artist. Bushra asks,

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Sa'dia Rehman, personal interview, December 15, 2016.

“Where did we get this shame? How did it sink so deep into our skin?”<sup>120</sup> These questions illuminate how immigrant shame functions as a palpable response to the dominant culture’s politics of cleanliness and the pressures they impress onto one’s personhood.

In an interview, Rehman recalls feeling shameful when installing her work in the bathroom. When all the other the artists were invited to engage the white cube, her inclusion in *Fatal Love* instead made her question her success and artistic self-worth. And yet, the exclusionary quality of this installation confronts and subverts exhibition conventions. Further, Rehman’s installation activates a direct conversation with its bathroom context in a way that intervenes in immigrant aesthetic discourse. That is to say, excluded yet engaged in spatial relationalities, *Lotah Stories* embodies the immigrant condition as illegitimate and thus “other.” I would argue though that the malaise can be subversive in the way it questions the respectability politics of bathroom practices. In this way, *Lotah Stories* demonstrates a compelling platform for an immigrant aesthetics of display, whereas its reception in the exhibition has treated the installation as one of many works. By contrast, I aim to analyze the multiple aspects that inform *Lotah Stories* and treat Rehman’s contribution to *Fatal Love* as emblematic of the show’s mission.

Crucially, *Lotah Stories* was inspired, in part, by a bad joke. Initially, Rehman aimed to pitch her artwork of handmade teacup sculptures for *Fatal Love*, an installation that comments on how tea serving functions as a ritual and form of hospitality when two families come together to discuss the arranged marriage of their young adult children.

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<sup>120</sup> Rehman, “Our Little Secrets,” 191.

However, with a dearth of display options, the curator and artist had to consider other spaces and the bathroom came up as an unconventional but potentially creative option – an option in which the teacup installation was no longer appropriate. Facetiously, Bushra suggested installing lotahs as fitting objects that would animate the space. Although Bushra’s suggestion was only half-serious, the next time they spoke, Rehman had not only developed an entirely new project, but one that advanced her aesthetic investment in making and installing objects as microcosmic of immigrant community practices. An installation about lotahs is appropriately site-specific for this allocated exhibition space, yet Bushra’s suggestion is “funny.” This is due to the fact that, especially in an immigrant context, lotahs are inherently fraught with shame. Yet, through personal narrative, sculptural (readymade) form, and installation, *Lotah Stories* mobilizes humor to contest the politics of respectability in and around community bathroom practices. In an art installation and community oral project that recounts tales of assimilation pressures alongside the emergence of a secret society of closeted lotah-users, the role of humor humanizes experiences that have otherwise conjured feelings of grotesqueness and freakishness despite ironically being about cleanliness. In this way, humor functions as the work’s entry point – that which makes the work accessible and transformative. Humor also eases the coming out process, and functions to undo the deep feelings of shame associated with hiding one’s practice, indeed one’s identity as a “closeted lotah user.”

Rather than analyze *Lotah Stories* through a South Asian cultural lens and attempt to valorize and recuperate a politics of cleanliness, I stress the humor of Rehman’s installation, which is, in part, contingent on its specific encounter in the bathroom. At

first glance, the installation in the bathroom is a confusing and thus jarring encounter, given that museum visitors are not expecting to dialog with art in bathrooms. This cognitive dissonance is a playful installation strategy that forces the visitor to consider cleanliness as a matter of political, cultural, and aesthetic inquiry, in situ. While bathroom humor is commonplace within the public imaginary, bathrooms have also been theorized as sites of irreverent desire and intimacy. To some though, they are also sites imbued with a sense of risk, understood therefore as highly regulated spaces. Perpetuating strict binary notions of gender, the consequences for disobeying such socially constructed rules have been dire, especially for those whose gender expression is non-binary and more fluid vis-à-vis the gender binary. As an unmistakably awkward space though, the bathroom is where one not only uses the toilet but where one can walk in on someone else, where one farts, misses the bowl, drops a tampon, runs out of paper; and all of these mishaps are ultimately embarrassing – perhaps embarrassment embodies that line between the shameful and the hilarious. Especially with public bathrooms, where the goal is to be brief, *Lotah Stories* asks its viewers to linger and loiter – all in the name of challenging respectability politics.

Given the pronounced regulatory forces around cleanliness, the pull to assimilate is strong alongside the pull to secrecy when deviating from norms. And, ironically, while washing oneself with lotahs is in essence a more hygienic practice than using toilet paper, the internalized associations between all things unfamiliar and all things negative (including dirtiness) run deep. I do not highlight shame to dwell on the impact of the feeling, however, but rather on how the (ridiculous) act of coming out as a lotah user diffuses the feeling of shame attached to the closet. In several personal narratives in

*Lotah Stories*, community members shared their deep sense of shame associated with the need for assimilation. And yet, Rehman's work offered a safe space for her participants' disclosures, which also allowed them room to question and eventually laugh about their shame. Many had follow-up stories that involved them mustering up the courage to come out to friends, roommates and even live-in partners as lotah users. In one story in particular, a woman explains how she keeps a coffee cup in the bathroom for the sake of discretion and even her live-in partner did not know its purpose. Upon coming out in the artwork, she was inspired to do so at home as well, at which point her partner revealed that he would return the cup to the kitchen every morning to drink coffee. Needless to say, this double revelation was accompanied by laughter and self-ridicule, a critical turn of events that diffused the shame around which the secret use of the lotahs revolves. The humor comes through in the coming out process because in the big reveal, the irony and absurdity of being embarrassed about cleanliness becomes clear. Rehman's installation reveals how coming out as a lotah user leads to diffusing one's own sense of shame, which is contingent on self-ridicule. Embedded in the artwork is the possibility of an awakening, one couched in humor. Immigrant feelings of shame tied to hygienic practices reflect how feelings in and around racialized otherness make one not only feel like an outsider, but like a freak, grotesque even. However, by diffusing shame, one can create distance from stigma and contextualize it as emblematic of the pressures of racialized otherness.

*Lotah Stories* explicitly flirts with the ridiculous, an aspect that its reception has downplayed. Instead, the work has been framed around feelings of secrecy and shame around foreign practices. *Fatal Love*'s catalog describes the work as "comical at first" but

also as an art piece that brings awareness to how certain public sites evoke “discomfort and anxiety for the immigrant.”<sup>121</sup> I, on the other hand, do not view these conditions in opposition to one another. I see the shame that is attached to this site of discomfort as the starting point from which political humor is possible. A profile piece in *Harper’s Magazine* emphasizes lotahs as a practice “on the down low” within immigrant communities and shares tips as to how to remain discreet rather than contest politics of respectability altogether.<sup>122</sup> In another review in the *New York Times*, co-curator Reddy describes the work’s intervention as “making visible the little things, the things that aren’t visible,” suggesting that visibility dissipates the shame associated with such private acts. I maintain that *Lotah Stories* is more than a visibility project. The nature and texture of the encounter matters: it is unexpected and jolting outside the confines of conventional display, and it is this absurd, irreverent encounter with the art installation in the bathroom that diffuses the overarching feeling associated with lotah use in an immigrant context. Jennifer Medina’s review in the *New York Times* does remark on the fact that Rehman’s contribution is “a bit of a humorous comment on the immigrant experience compared with political paintings, photographs, and sculptures in the rest of the show.”<sup>123</sup> However, not only does this downplay the quirks of *Lotah Stories*, it also sets up a false dichotomy between humor and politics. By contrast, I argue that *Lotah Stories* predominantly resonates as a humorous encounter with bathroom practices that have become politicized within an immigrant context; in fact its maximum impact is due to the cognitive dissonance the work engenders in its encounter.

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<sup>121</sup> Reddy, “Creating a South Asian Contemporary,” 20.

<sup>122</sup> “On the Down Low,” *Harper’s Magazine*. August 2005, 20.

<sup>123</sup> Jennifer Medina, “In a Museum Bathroom, a Tool of Hygiene Becomes Art,” *New York Times*, March 14, 2005.



## Conclusion

Sutapa Biswas' *Housewives and Steak-Knives*, Rasheed Araeen's *The Golden Verses* and Sa'dia Rehman's *Lotah Stories* represent three examples in the South Asian diaspora that deploy a playful aesthetic that has been under-examined. By emphasizing Biswas' dissonant juxtapositions as a playful inversion of expectations revolving around gender and goddesses, I expand the reading of *Housewives and Steak-Knives* beyond an example of feminist resistance. By placing Kali in the contemporary moment in the role of "housewife," Biswas offers more than an alternative to conventional (that is to say hetero-patriarchal and colonial) gender roles, destabilizing the often times synonymous categories of "housewife" and "goddess." In this way, my analysis rereads Biswas' Kali as a disidentificatory intervention, one that attempts to reframe and undermine expectations rather than simply counter them.

Whereas Biswas' canvas has been mostly understood as an image of resistance, Araeen's billboard has been predominantly received as a confrontational set of semiotics and was vandalized on multiple occasions. I return to this work to emphasize how this vandalism represents more than an unfortunate misunderstanding, but is key to grasping the consequences of eliding play in analyzing the visual culture of difference. Araeen's sarcastic tone was overlooked and as a result the full impact of the work was partially lost. However, this missed opportunity, this failure, is arguably the most illuminating aspect of *The Golden Verses'* aesthetic intervention, enabling a productive conversation about untranslatability and illegibility.

And finally, Rehman's installation has been mostly framed as a project about personal oral histories, but its premise, disclosing one's status as a closeted lotah-user, lends itself to ridicule that is worth unpacking. Moreover, the art installation's location in the museum bathroom makes for an unexpected, jarring encounter. Together, these aspects of *Lotah Stories* come together to undermine the shame generally associated with the lotah-user's "closet." In the following chapters I continue to reread works of art by South Asian diasporic artists whose practices have been framed under the rubric of "diaspora" but whose playful aesthetic texture, whether it takes the form of parody, camp, caricature, the grotesque, or sarcasm, has yet to be fully explored.

## IMAGES



Figure 1.1  
Sutapa Biswas. *Housewives with Steak-Knives*, 1984-5. Mixed media on paper.



Figure 1.2  
Detail of Sutapa Biswas. *Housewives with Steak-Knives*, 1984-5. Mixed media on paper.





Figure 1.3  
Ganesh from Picart's *Coutumes*, 1735 (from Mitter, Partha, *Much Maligned Monsters: A History of Reactions to Indian Art* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977], 78).



Figure 1.4  
Sutapa Biwas. *Birdsong*, 2004. 16mm film.





Figure 1.5  
Rasheed Araeen. *The Golden Verses*, 1990. Artangel billboard project, Cleveland Museum and Art Gallery; public installation.



*Lotah Stories*, 2005

Figure 1.6  
Sa'dia Rehman. *Lotah Stories*, 2005. Installation in Queens Museum of Art bathroom (for *Fatal Love: South Asian American Art Now* exhibition).

## CHAPTER TWO

### Posture and Place in Sunil Gupta's *Exiles* and *Sun City*: A Case of Under-Examined Play

In this chapter, I study two major photo series by London-based queer photographer Sunil Gupta (b. 1953), as examples of under-examined play. I analyze *Exiles* (1986) as a parody of the documentary form, and *Sun City* (2010) as a camping of orientalist gay imagery in art history. These works came almost twenty-five years apart and are motivated by different (albeit related) socio-political moments: *Exiles* represents an iconic photo series during Gupta's formative years in London and the Black Arts Movement, whereas *Sun City* emerges out of the queer political moment that framed Gupta's return to New Delhi (2005–2013). As a queer, HIV-positive, immigrant artist whose practice emerged in consonance with the Black Arts Movement in London during the 1980s, his work developed alongside the rise of Cultural Studies in the academy and found a productive lens in identity politics. However, art criticism that emphasizes these politics of identity has also pigeonholed his work by interpreting his practice as primarily invested in generating visibility for historically marginalized communities. I broaden the reception of Gupta's practice as an example of queer racialized visual representation negotiated by playful form.

*Exiles*, one of Gupta's most iconic photo series from the Black Arts Movement in London, has been mostly received as an ethnographic document of gay Indians. While *Exiles* certainly confirms the existence of gay male desire in India despite the dearth of public forms of display, my formal analysis emphasizes its staged quality, which enables another kind of reading: how *Exiles* engenders a critically visual platform that illuminates

the challenges of recording queer counter-publics in a time and place like New Delhi during the 1980s. More specifically, I analyze how Gupta manipulates his subjects into postures that ultimately unearth queer dimensions to their given landscapes. Thus, rather than a visibility project, an argument for alternative and overlooked bodies of work that engender new knowledge and other ways of seeing, I read *Exiles* as an invisibility project, as an exercise in documentary parody that enacts the visual logics of that which we do not and cannot not see. I draw on theories of parody – a rhetorical tool that imitates aesthetic conventions to deliberately subvert them – to express how Gupta’s turn to staging illuminates the limits of generating documentary records, especially around censored sexualities. Further, I argue that *Exiles’* parody of documentary enacts a form of queer archiving. That is to say, the creator of the series must rely on staging in order to make visible and hence rewrite an underground queer presence in his hometown, New Delhi. In this way, *Exiles* manifests a critical phoniness or fabulatory invention that invents or creates a discursive and cultural alternative that functions to subvert regimes of visibility.<sup>124</sup> Conceptualizing the parody of *Exiles* as a form of queer archiving allows me to re-imagine the series as not only queer in content, but in form as well.

Upon outlining *Exiles’* production and reception in the UK, during the 1980s, I assess its inaugural exhibition in India, which does not occur until 2004. This showing of *Exiles* became possible as LGBTQI advocacy work was gaining political ground at the turn of the millennium in the subcontinent. *Exiles’* exhibition in India would also instigate Gupta’s return to New Delhi and his consequent entrée into the Indian art world.

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<sup>124</sup> Tavia Nyong’o, “Racial Kitsch and Black Performance,” *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 15:2 (2002) 371-391.

It is during this period that Gupta creates *Sun City* (2010), a campy tableau vivant made up of thirty-two photographs of a gay immigrant protagonist wandering through Sun City, a Parisian bathhouse – in fact, the largest bathhouse in Europe, currently in regular use by the white Parisian mainstream gay scene. I observe how the reception of his work from the 1980s – a reception that has largely been limited to an identity politics framework that focuses on marginalized content – has followed him through to the twenty-first century. *Sun City* has been understood as a narrative about sexual freedom; however, I broaden the analysis of the series by centering a formal analysis of how its highly orientalized setting inhabits a set of postures available in the history of gay erotica. By emphasizing exaggerated aspects of the bathhouse (color, lighting, stage-like set up, and pose), the artifice of the idealized gay male sexual beauty, and the display of self-conscious (contrived, not overt) eroticism, I outline the enactment of camp in the series. Further, by situating poses in intertextual dialog with homoerotic photography by artists like George Platt Lynes and Wilhelm von Gloeden,<sup>125</sup> in the highly orientalized context of the bathhouse, I re-imagine Gupta's photo series as an exercise in camping orientalism. According to Roland Boer, orientalist camp refers to "an orientalism that has gone over the top, suffused with a sense of too-muchness that ends up being a parody of itself."<sup>126</sup> I am specifically invested in the queer iterations and stakes of camping orientalism, that is, as an aesthetic strategy that calls out and subverts the colonial formations and residues of gay desire. I turn a set of photographs in gay male public spaces into a diagnosis of the racial character of desire, by highlighting the protagonist's

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<sup>125</sup> While foundational in legitimizing gay nudes as aesthetically pleasing and sexually desirable, photographic practices like those of George Platt Lynes and Wilhelm von Gloeden have inevitably perpetuated a specific notion of desire funneled through white standards of beauty.

<sup>126</sup> Roland Boer, *The Earthy Nature of the Bible: Fleshly Readings of Sex, Masculinity, and Carnality* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 121.



failure to perform “bathhouse,” or rather his over-performance of asexuality and undesirability. Ultimately, I make a case for camping orientalism as an intervening racialized gaze in queer art history. Gupta’s citational play re-contextualizes posturing figures in order to decode and potentially diffuse the orientalist spectacle of gay desire. In this way, my project expands the uses of an aesthetic sensibility like camp beyond the purview of gender and sexuality to assess racialized dynamics of desire. If the colonial residues of queer desire often go unseen, *Sun City*’s chosen setting alongside the protagonist’s over-performance of asexuality and undesirability animates what these residues might look like.

Following chapter one, which outlines how narratives around art and difference emerge first as new openings but risk containing analytical possibilities around that emergence, my reading of Gupta’s two series offers an intimate case study that further demonstrates the limits of art criticism in the age of identity politics, extending from the turn of the millennium - 1980s to the present day. While visibility projects offer a platform for historically and systemically marginalized content, they also obscure the nuances around marginalized subject positions. For example, such projects do not necessarily have equal access to opportunities that would enable their own “becoming visible.” I conclude chapter two by evidencing the prescriptive confines of art market forces that, despite an ostensible global turn in art, continue to police what cultural difference should look like. As I reflect on how the reception of Gupta’s series overlooks critical aspects of his formal interventions at various points in his career, chapter two re-imagines his practice as an exercise in artifice – both parodic and camp – that exposes the transnational, censoring forces governing queer brown bodies.

### Race, Sexuality, and Playful Form: Preceding Preoccupations in Photography

Since the inception of his photographic career, Sunil Gupta has had an eye for the politics of identity. Importantly, he has also had an eye for playful form; however this aspect of his aesthetic labor has been overlooked. Born in 1953 to a middle-class family, Gupta grew up in New Delhi,<sup>127</sup> and at the age of thirteen he developed an interest in the photographic medium. He and a friend created a makeshift darkroom in the barsati (a spare room on the rooftop of the house)<sup>128</sup> and he remembers the countless hours they labored over the black and white photographic process. Gupta also remembers being intrigued by the camera's capacity to prompt specific kinds of posturing. His elder sister was his first photographic muse, and he would coax her into posing melodramatically for him, inspired primarily by the heightened tenor of Bollywood romance.<sup>129</sup> Arguably, then, Gupta's photographic eye was informed from early on by the role of artifice, desire, and the pose. In 1969, at sixteen years old, he and his family moved to Montreal, Canada. He was only allowed to bring a single suitcase of his belongings, which was unfortunately lost at the airport. As a result, these early photos are missing.

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<sup>127</sup> Nizamuddin in Old Delhi (in New Delhi).

<sup>128</sup> Although now he is unsure how they managed to do so, since the rooftop is not the coldest but the warmest part of the house and thus does not provide not optimal conditions for developing photographs (Sunil Gupta, personal interview, February 2, 2014).

<sup>129</sup> Sunil Gupta, interview by Radhika Singh, *Exposure* 4, no. 1 (2008), 15–16; Gupta, personal interview, February 2, 2014. For more on Bollywood's postcolonial whimsy, see Namita Goswami, "The Empire Sings Back: Aesthetics, Politics, and Postcolonial Whimsy," *Contemporary Aesthetics* 2 (2009), <http://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=545>

Like a “good” model minority, Gupta studied business at Loyola College,<sup>130</sup> Montreal in an attempt to assuage his parents’ anxieties for his future security, but he never gave up on photography and invested in a basic Nikon camera and an enlarger lens to pursue documentary work. In Montreal, he became more politically aware and got involved in local advocacy around various disenfranchised communities. In 1976, he inaugurated McGill University’s first LGBT student group and organized several forums for the community, such as a gay prom, newsletters, and a telephone SOS helpline. This burgeoning community also aligned their causes with workers’ union rights that were brewing at the time. Together, the group cultivated a progressive, intersectional activist social circle.<sup>131</sup> In April 1975, Aquarius, a gay bathhouse on Crescent Street, was firebombed, killing three patrons, and Gupta was one of the first to document the tragic scene. These images have become a major part of the city’s gay and activist archival visual history.<sup>132</sup>

While Gupta has used the camera as a tool to make visible current issues plaguing his gay and activist communities, his interest in documentation has been matched by a curiosity over the role of artifice and staging in photography. Thus, alongside his documentary endeavors, Gupta also created fictional narratives that revolved around his gay life in Montreal. He and a friend created several photo sequences that animated the bars they frequented with a parallel dimension. They developed fictionalized narratives around the people they knew; they used fake names and made-up bar scenes to create their amateur docudrama. Gupta took photos while his friend wrote the accompanying

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<sup>130</sup> Loyola has been a part of Concordia University since 1974.

<sup>131</sup> Gupta, interview by Singh, 19.

<sup>132</sup> Held at Les Archives gaies du Québec à Montréal.

text, which mostly comprised poetic couplets. And although these short series were largely meant to entertain his entourage of friends and lovers, Gupta's text and image relationalities yielded docudramas that demonstrate an investment in the political possibilities of artifice in documentary. In this instance, Gupta's documentary fiction visualizes and reflects otherwise marginalized lives back to themselves – a project embedded in the significance of self-fashioning and self-invention within a young, gay male, metropolitan context.

Having spent his adolescent and young adult years in Montreal, Gupta moved for a brief time to New York City, where he received training at the New School.<sup>133</sup> When he moved to London in 1979, his most formative years followed, and he found himself honing his craft for the next twenty-five years amidst the vibrant and controversial era of identity politics in the UK – particularly the critical decade of the 1980s, which saw the non-white population begin organizing as a critical mass towards social change for the first time. He enrolled at the University for the Creative Arts in Farnham for a three-year diploma course in photography, followed by the Royal College of Art for his Master's of Art degree, for a total of five years of education.<sup>134</sup> And while the majority of practitioners in training at the time ended up in advertising, Gupta envisioned a career in documentary and quickly turned the camera towards the shifting socio-political landscape of London during the 1980s, which was becoming increasingly visible. Beyond using the

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<sup>133</sup> Under the auspices of established practitioners at the New School such as George Tice, Lisette Model, and Philippe Halsman, Gupta learned modernist history alongside the craft of photography. Their emphasis on black and white, negative, positive, darkroom, and silver printing practice was foundational to Gupta's educational training in documentary.

<sup>134</sup> His RCA thesis, "Northern Media, Southern Lives" (1983), criticized western media for obsessively "showing pictures of dead people from other places, either through war, disease or starvation" (Sunil Gupta, *Pictures from Here* [London: Chris Boot, 2003], 11) that overshadow less sensationalist and more intimate visual narratives.

camera for the purposes of reportage, however, he manipulated it in various ways, thereby translating these realities through a more subjective lens. I read his manipulation of the camera, in part, as a manifestation of under-examined playful form. I elaborate on this below in my analysis of *Exiles*.

For his 1983 RCA final exhibition, Gupta and a group of students organized the college's first Black show and invited local government officials from the Greater London Council's (GLC) Race Equality Unit to attend. Indeed, Gupta's arrival in London and subsequent art training overlapped with what was then emerging as the Black Arts Movement and he would become a leading figure in Black British photography. As a member of the first generation of Afro-Asian photographers in London, Gupta was part of a critical mass of art activist practitioners who conceived of Black as a political category invested in challenging the white hegemony of the British art world.<sup>135</sup> As chapter one elucidates, progressive non-white artists in the UK interpreted Blackness as an ideological intervention and a political category beyond essentialist characterizations of race, aimed at engendering a new sense of community based on a shared sense of colonial historical oppression.

Gupta's practice in particular is firmly located in the emergence of Black British photography that documented racialized lived experience as it intersected with issues of sexuality. His photography engaged with self-fashioning through portraiture and self-portraiture, an aesthetic practice that he pursued in conjunction with community-oriented

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<sup>135</sup> This is in part due to changes in restrictive immigration policies after WWII when Britain needed to rebuild the nation and welcomed laborers from its colonies and elsewhere overseas. Until the Commonwealth Immigrants Act of 1962, all Commonwealth citizens could enter and remain in the UK without restriction.

advocacy around institutional recognition. In 1983, after RCA, he joined a local government body, the GLC's Anti-Racist Design Committee, and alongside like-minded peers such as David A. Bailey and Monika Baker promoted Black photography as an emerging practice committed to the visual politics of representation. Their community organizing led to the GLC's *Reflections on the Black Experience* (1986), the first show dedicated to Black British photography, which showed at the Brixton Art Gallery. Two years after *Reflections*, Autograph ABP (the Association for Black Photographers) opened, becoming the first institute dedicated to Black photography in London, and Gupta is attributed as one of the co-founders.<sup>136</sup>

*Reflections* was the first show in the UK to recognize and support Black practitioners who were engaged in confronting the British photography scene's systemic elision, supporting their goals around self-fashioning as a creative collective of media professionals. However, the show was not without its limitations. There was a considerable lack of money and time allocated to the project, which inevitably affected the quality of some commissioned works. Conceptually, the show's use of bold black

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<sup>136</sup> The same year as *Reflections*, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher shut down the GLC; the institution that had fostered the movement would be forced to abandon it, in what social historians German and Rees describe as "the greatest single destruction of London's local government since [...] the late thirteenth century" (Lindsey German and John Rees. *A People's History of London* [London: Verso, 2012], 5). The organizers of *Reflections* took the show to the Arts Council of Great Britain, arguing fervently for public funding for the emerging field of Black photography. Eventually the Arts Council reformed its policy, where four percent of its "budget would be spent on ethnic minority arts, across the board" (Gupta, "Curating the 'New Internationalism' Visual Arts," in *Naming a Practice: Curatorial Strategies for the Future*, ed. Peter White [Banff: Banff Center Press, 1996], 82.) This "four percent" referred to the percentage of Afro-Asian people in the UK at the time. When Baker approached the Arts Council's Photography Officer Barry Lane, requesting funding to tour the exhibit, he replied instead with a small research grant (£2,000) in support of a more expansive idea for a black co-op. In 1988, a small group including Baker, Gupta, Francis Armet, and Rotimi Fani-Kayode organized into a legal entity under the name Autograph. Autograph was initially set up in the spirit of *Reflections* – Black experience through a Black lens. The internationally unique agency has been the first organization committed to Asian, African, and Caribbean politics and photography. Since its inception, Autograph has developed into a space that addresses photography about human rights issues broadly speaking.

frames for the photos was considered too severe.<sup>137</sup> Its five broad and overlapping themes – social, political, economic, cultural, gender and sexuality – lacked precision and thus seemed indistinguishable from each other. That said, at the time, *Reflections* was “the most important project that [he] had ever participated in.”<sup>138</sup> In Gupta’s words:

It brought me in contact with grassroots politics and the inner workings of local political power, and it gave me a sense of the body politics in which my personal interests in photography could play a part. It was a far cry from the elitist world of the Royal College and South Kensington [...]. Other skills became [...] important: writing, organizing, formulating strategic plans. The project brought photographers out of the woodwork and together for the first time and under the umbrella of the GLC [...]. It brought me into personal contact with [photographers] who I might never have met otherwise.<sup>139</sup>

Gupta’s words reveal his commitment to community organizing in the arts. He showed an untitled series of black and white photos in *Reflections* that were analyzed, like much of the show, as issue-based. This framing eclipsed a more in-depth formal analysis of what artists in the show were doing as Black photographers, not just as a Black community. Consider Gupta’s observations here:

Occasionally I would try to introduce [...] subjectivity into my freelance editorial photography but editors would always recoil in horror. I was

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<sup>137</sup> Roshini Kempadoo, “Review: The Black Experience,” *Blackboard* (Summer/Autumn, 1986), 26. InIVA Archives, Rivington Place Collection, Stuart Hall Library, UK.

<sup>138</sup> Gupta, *Pictures From Here*, 2.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

amazed at the extent to which the media still thought it was dealing in objective truths, well into the Thatcher years.<sup>140</sup>

In line with scholars invested in a socially engaged deconstruction of the medium, Gupta's reference to subjectivity betrays his desire and consequent struggle to play with the conventions of the documentary genre in a way that undoes its claims to objective representation.

As Stuart Hall and Bailey explain in the *Critical Decade* (1992), a special issue of *Ten.8 Magazine*,<sup>141</sup> one of the most important publications on photography in Britain at the time, the 1980s witnessed a major shift in photography in the UK, a shift initiated by Black practitioners eager to revalue Blackness for themselves through a racialized apparatus. Hall and Mark Sealy in *Different* (2001) elaborate further:

Despite the force of Roland Barthes' startling formulation, the photographic image is *not* a "message without a code." Reality cannot speak for itself, through the image, in an unmediated way. Its "truth" is not to be measured in terms of its correspondence to some objective "reality" out there, beyond the frame. Rather, representation in its wider meaning modifies, augments or displaces the circumstantial or evidential order of "the real," in order to bring [...] meaning or "truth" to visibility. Artistic production is [this] [...] labour of transformation – as we say, *the work*.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> In the 1980s, *Ten.8 Magazine* was an important publication on photography; it succeeded *Camerawork*, which examined the political and social valence of photography beyond mere artistry while also devising strategies that subverted conventional viewpoints of the medium.

<sup>142</sup> Stuart Hall and Mark Sealy, *Different: A Historical Context* (London: Phaidon, 2001), 38.



Exposing the ruses of indexical realism proposed by the photographic medium, Black British photographers were drawing an explicit connection between the medium and a wider struggle for visibility, on the one hand, while deconstructing the politics and burden of representation on the other. They instigated a critical visual discourse that challenged the colonial apparatus of photography, which had for so long spoken for and grotesquely stereotyped their lived experience.<sup>143</sup> During the same year as *Reflections*, Gupta produced one of his most iconic photo series of the period, *Exiles* (1986). Whereas *Exiles* has been received as visibility project for gays in India, I claim that the series becomes far more valuable for the discipline of art history – the discipline the Black Arts Movement was aiming to irrevocably disrupt, after all – when assessed for its exercises in form: as a staged documentary series that undoes the conventions of documentary logic around what *can* be visible and not.

#### Documentary Parody in *Exiles* (1986)

Gupta has committed his practice to decoding and recoding documentary photography as a way of calling out the medium for objectifying minoritarian lives, and

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<sup>143</sup> John Grierson critiques the industry of documentary and its links to state sponsorship for generating a tool of social control, fronting as a tool of knowledge dissemination. Major thinkers such as Susan Sontag, Martha Rosler, and Allan Sekula have led the critique of documentary. For example, with respect to spectatorship, even the most accomplished documentary images dull the viewer whose incessant thirst for novelty engenders de-sensitivity. Rosler argues that while documentary has the capacity to illustrate poverty and oppression, it cannot account for nor resolve such atrocities; in fact, at its best – or worst – the genre is more prone to elevating the messenger (the photographer) over the message. And finally, Sekula severely denigrates the genre for its sentimentalist propagandistic proclivities. For the next generation of thinkers, such as Trinh Minh-ha, the category of documentary is a fiction in and of itself. Documentary only functions when its conventions are invisible to the viewer and so when it succeeds as a framing device. Hence exposing the apparatus *disrupts* the category; see Hall and Sealy, *Different*; John Roberts, *The Art of Interruption: Realism, Photography and the Everyday* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998).

especially those at the intersections of race and sexuality. *Exiles*, a series of twelve snapshot-like documentary photographs, is arguably Gupta's most notable series from his time in London. Yet the most crucial and under-examined aspect of *Exiles* is that the series is, in fact, staged. *Exiles* is not a documentary of gay Indians per se, but a parody of documentary – a staged series that deploys artifice in order to communicate the genre's limitations, in this case, around capturing censored gay publics.

*Exiles* is composed of twelve color C-print images staged as though they were documentary stills. Similar to a makeshift family album, the photograph sizes are not standardized; most are formatted as a 19" x 19" square, but others are rectangular (i.e. 15" x 23"). The images do not follow a teleological narrative and so function independently from one another. They often hang sequentially, in a row, yet they do not follow a particular order, nor do they all need to be hung together in order for *Exiles* to make sense. Formally though, the images in *Exiles* do adhere to a similar logic: they are all staged photos of gay men in New Delhi; they are known to the artist, but their identity remains intentionally anonymous; and finally, all images are accompanied by text. At first glance, *Exiles* reads as a series of documentary photographs portraying gay Indian men inhabiting public and private spaces. Commissioned by the Photographer's Gallery, Gupta traveled from London to his hometown, New Delhi, hoping to produce a visibility project of Indian gay male communities.<sup>144</sup> Given the organizing role of identity in art

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<sup>144</sup> Gupta was commissioned to make a new body of work for *The Body Politic*, a show curated by Alex Noble about current interventions in the representation of sexuality. The exhibition also produced a catalogue, published in *Ten.8* as a special issue. The exhibition did not necessarily have a groundbreaking impact, given that the organizing theme of sexual difference was not new. In 1985–86 the New Museum of Contemporary Art organized *Difference: On Representation and Sexuality* at the ICA, and Camerawork curated *Same Difference* in 1986. Instead this exhibition explores the "heterogeneity of vision" (Alex Noble, "Body Politic," *Ten.8 Magazine* 25 [1987]).

historical discourse during the 1980s, these initial intentions undergirding *Exiles* are not surprising. However, Gupta's encounters in New Delhi would inevitably shift his documentary goals. When he questioned men about gay life in India he was immediately and consistently confronted with the censoring forces of Section 377, the colonial-era anti-sodomy law of the Indian Penal Code, which was exploited by law enforcement to censor queer publics.<sup>145</sup> Gupta quickly understood that *Exiles* would have to insure his participants' anonymity. As a result, he created a series of staged but snapshot-like photographs that do not document reality but mediate it. That is to say, rather than spy on unsuspecting men in public, he found a cast of people who were willing to pose for the camera in a way that envisioned possible public gay scenes that go unseen. Furthermore, he intentionally set his pictures around major landmarks such as Humayun's Tomb, Jama Masjid, Lodhi Gardens, or India Gate in an attempt to re-imagine a queer occupation of public sites associated with Indian national history. As a staged series, *Exiles* deploys artifice to convey the genre's limitations, in this case around capturing censored public gay visibility.

*Exiles* has been mostly received as an ethnographic document of gay men in India rather than a photo series that plays with form – more specifically, one that relies on artifice to enact how such gay public gestures are, in reality, quite pervasive but too fleeting – given their censorship – to be recorded. While *Exiles* certainly confirms the

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<sup>145</sup> Publications like Arvind Narrain and Gautam Bhan, *Because I have a Voice: Queer Politics in India* (New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2005) or Arvind Narrain and Alok Gupta, *Law Like Love: Queer Perspectives on Law* (New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2011) map out the key political and historical events, while also addressing community organizing and advocacy efforts that led to the New Delhi High Court's repeal of Section 377 in 2009. This decision was appealed, and in January 2014 the Supreme Court decided to reverse the 2009 repeal – a legal decision that re-criminalized homosexuality in India. On February 2, 2016, the Supreme Court re-opened the case, making a sense of change imminent yet again.

existence of gay male desire, its staged quality elucidates the challenges of recording queer counter-publics in New Delhi in the 1980s, given the censoring realities of Section 377. Thus, rather than a visibility project emerging out of art in the age of identity, I value *Exiles* for the ways it develops a visual language around documenting invisibility. Bracketing the impulse to create alternative bodies of work that engender new knowledge from the margins and other ways of seeing, I instead read *Exiles* as an overlooked exercise in documentary parody that ultimately enacts the visual logics of that which we do not and cannot see. For example, in “Connaught Place,” a photo from *Exiles*, a young man sits on a park bench with his arms crossed. As he looks towards the center of the frame, he leads the viewer to another seated figure in the background, the object of his subtle gaze (figure 2.1). In the background, the man returns the glance over his shoulder. Furthermore, Gupta couples this image of stolen glimpses between two men seated on park benches across a patch of green with a text that reads, “This operates like a pick-up joint. People don’t want to talk, they just want to get it off,” outing a well-known, central part of New Delhi as a furtive hotspot for gay solicitation. While such cruising gestures are commonly shared between men desiring men in the city (both now and during the 1980s), they are forced under the public radar. For this reason, Gupta’s carefully crafted scene is not available to the documentary eye, and must rely on staging to “document” unseen realities. In this way, “Connaught Place” animates fleeting aspects of the sociality of sexuality.

In another photograph, text and image again function to make evident and legible queer interactions in public that would otherwise be censored. Amid a crowd of men loitering around the gates of Jama Masjid, the largest, and one of the oldest, mosques in

India, Gupta focuses on two men sitting at the center of the frame and whose tender and familiar embrace tests the boundaries between homosocial belonging and homoerotic desire (figure 2.2). In the foreground, a young man in profile smokes a cigarette as he gazes beyond the photographic frame, while another man in a purple, checkered shirt is also captured in profile, his face slightly obscured as he looks over to the seated men in the background. Forming a framing device around the image's central embracing couple, these two standing men in the foreground direct the viewer's gaze. Here again, the text is illuminating and betrays the illicit undertones of the embrace: it reads, "I love this part of town. It's got such character and you can have sex just walking in the crowd," reorienting this site's association from prayer towards public sex. The subversive power of text and image is twofold. First, this juxtaposition of image and text taps into a gay Indian common sense about "this part of town" and communes directly with underground knowledge and experiences about the underlying sexual politics of certain settings. Moreover, the relationship between image and text re-imagines religious sites as brimming with discreet gay encounters. Indeed, *Exiles'* text and image relations engender intimacies between site and citation, not only casting a lens on the queer dimensions of known landmarks (that lie beneath the surface), but also queering the landscape of the nation's capital despite the highly censored nature of such realities.

Overall, the juxtapositions between text and image in *Exiles* come together to radically shift meaning. Deriving from conversations the artist had with his chosen sitters while creating the series, Gupta's accompanying texts articulates gay Indian interiorities. Some image and text relations betray a thirst for outlets that build community, but others indicate fear of becoming Section 377 martyrs. While some juxtapositions demonstrate

the will to escape the pressures of societal norms, others animate traditional views within the gay community, such as the notion of compulsory heterosexuality as a family duty. In figure 3, these relations between text and image are further buttressed by an awkward display of intimacy between the two subjects. In this tourism photography-inspired shot, two men caress each other at the famed India Gate monument (figure 2.3). Admittedly, their embrace is stiff, but their form curiously mirrors the architectural structure of the arch. As such, place and posture come together to offer a language and legibility to unseen intimacies between men who desire men. This is perhaps what Lauren Berlant means when she makes the claim that intimacy “creates spaces and usurps places meant for other kinds of relations.”<sup>146</sup> The nationalist monument in the background, with all its hetero-patriarchal overtones (as per Gayatri Gopinath’s deconstruction of postcolonial nationalism),<sup>147</sup> weighs in, and the image’s caption speaks to this weight: “Even if you have a lover you should get married and have children. Who would look after you in old age?” This statement expresses the concerns of a closeted community under systemic censorship. Indeed, image and text relate and visually parallel the stiffness of the couple *and* the stiffness of the India Gate structure; while the latter speaks to ideological pressures, in particular the intersection of nationalist and familial obligations, the former articulates the out-of-placeness of queer intimacies in public. One directly informs the other.

These three examples in *Exiles* deploy staging in documentary as a way to challenge reigning interpretations of place and their conventionally accepted significance.

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<sup>146</sup> Lauren Berlant, *Intimacy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 2.

<sup>147</sup> Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

Mimicking the documentary form, the formal richness of these shots exposes the productive differences between merely recording one's surroundings and creating a more incisive representation of them. In this way, *Exiles* comprises a set of documentary photographs that parodies the genre of documentary. Yet *Exiles* has not been sufficiently teased out in art historical analysis; received predominantly as issue-based photography rather than as a clever use of artifice that sheds light on the limits of such projects, its formal wit went unremarked in art reviews of *The Body Politic*. Instead, Gupta's series was pigeonholed as an ethnic aside within the representation of sexuality. Even the curator only vaguely gestured to how Gupta was rethinking documentary, without explicitly mentioning the staging of his shots and the stakes of these formal decisions with regard to censored gay life.<sup>148</sup>

In 1999, Gupta had his first solo exhibition in New York City at Admit One Gallery, and the show featured *Exiles*. The well-known art critic Holland Cotter reviewed the works but did not acknowledge the staged aspect of Gupta's shots either. Instead, he described the scenes as though they were "straight" documentary stills, ultimately missing Gupta's queer archival process:

*Exiles* [...] looks at the life of gay men in India, where homosexual activity is still prohibited by legal statutes left over from colonial rule. In Mr. Gupta's photo-and-text pieces, single men and couples gather at bleak-looking cruising spots in public parks or around historical monuments. In most of the pictures the men have their faces turned away

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<sup>148</sup> Noble, "Body Politic," 3.

from the camera.<sup>149</sup>

The use of the word “look” may be inconsequential or unassuming, but in this instance Cotter glosses over Gupta’s staging and interprets his photographic intentions as journalistic. Cotter’s missed opportunity here demonstrates a trend in art criticism around the visual culture of difference that focuses on content at the expense of a formal analysis of the artist’s aesthetic labor.

And finally, while the *Stranger than Fiction* (2004) exhibition held at the Hayward Gallery in London describes *Exiles* as fictionalized documentary, it does not sufficiently highlight this aspect or do anything with the observation. The show dissects visual narratives “that are truly fictitious, [...] true yet laced with fiction, and [...] true but that challenge credibility,”<sup>150</sup> thereby resonating with my chapter’s objective of centering on an aesthetic analysis of play. Yet the show fails to explicitly locate the use of Gupta’s documentary staging. The exhibition catalog does not even mention Gupta and so does not provide any context for his aesthetic decisions. As a result, *Exiles* is subsumed by the other works in the show and their overarching themes of trauma, absence, and ambiguity.<sup>151</sup> Without explicit attention, the series reads more like an uncomplicated and even tragic queer ethnography of censored lives. By focusing on Gupta’s photographic process, my chapter re-imagines *Exiles* as a series grounded in staging and parody. These formal concerns, I argue, do not aim to recuperate invisible

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<sup>149</sup> Holland Cotter, “Art in Review: Sunil Gupta – *From Here to Eternity*,” *New York Times*, January 7, 2000.

<sup>150</sup> Isobel Johnstone and Ann Jones, *Stranger than Fiction* (London: Hayward Gallery, 2004), n.p.

<sup>151</sup> The exhibition was organized by the Arts Council of England and featured artists from their collection who deconstructed accepted notions of home, nation, history, and narration. They addressed transnational realities in Britain, including issues like placelessness, cultural chameleonism, and political and religious conflict (Sukhdev Sandhu, “Seeming Other People,” in Johnstone and Jones, *Stranger than Fiction*, n. p.).



subjects, but attend to the visual logics of invisibility.

In line with Alexandra Juhasz and Jesse Lerner's notion of fake documentary, *Exiles'* documentary deconstructs and reconstructs irretrievable realities. By relying on staging to "document" that which goes unseen, *Exiles* makes visible the power dynamics embedded in recording the visible world. Not only formally complex, but socially engaged and uniquely situated both in time and place, the formal qualities of the series labor to reveal disguised truths.<sup>152</sup> In addition to rereading *Exiles* as a parody of documentary, I analyze the series as a form of queer archiving, that is, as an inventive strategy for documenting realities outside or adjacent to the bounds of official History (capitalized here to foreground its authoritative stance over the multiple histories in its shadow). Several scholars who assess the archive as a system of knowledge conceive of the archive not as a static body of knowledge waiting to be revealed, but as an animate organism that actively works to conceal and reveal information based on the power dynamics that condition its formation and endurance.<sup>153</sup> *Exiles* makes evident how that which enters the historical record is filtered through the regulatory optics of heteronormativity. *Exiles* is thus more than a series of censored queer narratives, but is (paradoxically) grounded in an undocumentable truth, wholly inaccessible to documentary representation. And, while one could make the argument that these images could be made without the sitters' consent, Gupta angles his shots in such a way that they

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<sup>152</sup> Alexandra Juhasz and Jesse Lerner, *F is for Phony: Fake documentary and Truth's Undoing*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006) 2–16.

<sup>153</sup> For more on queer archiving, see Anjali R. Arondekar, *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive In India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009); Ann Cvetkovich. *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Daniel Marshall et al., "Queering Archives: Historical Unravelings," special issue, *Radical History Review* 120 (2014); Daniel Marshall et al., "Queering Archives: Intimate Tracings," special issue, *Radical History Review* 122 (2015).

are actually too close and too intimate in their construction and composition for that possibility. Although their formal richness is subtle – to an unsuspecting eye, they are convincingly documentary – Gupta’s staged photography not only challenges the documentary eye but the “snapshot” aesthetics as well. Further, as figures 2.1, 2.2, and 2.3 illuminate, fleeting glances in public spaces and intimate gestures that echo public structures have the capacity not only to capture queer bodies, but to rewrite queerness into the fabric of the Indian capital and the artist’s hometown, New Delhi. This rewriting animates how Gupta’s parody of documentary functions as a potent form of queer archiving for the subcontinent.

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As Gupta’s staged photography gave form to the regulatory forces that censored queer brown desire, *Sun City* would push the boundaries of that deployed artifice by incorporating parodic posturing and camp spatial dynamics. Approximately twenty-five years apart and motivated by different (albeit related) socio-political moments, *Exiles* represents an iconic photo series created during Gupta’s formative years in London and the Black Arts Movement, whereas *Sun City* (2010) emerged out of the queer political moment that framed his return to New Delhi (2005–2013). Gupta did not become active in the Indian art scene until 2004 when he exhibited in India for the first time, and he decided to move back to New Delhi the following year. Thus Gupta entered the contemporary Indian art scene in the twenty-first century at the age of fifty-one as a foreigner categorically invested in queer Indian representation. In an interview, Gupta shared how his decision to show in India, and later return there, was undoubtedly inspired by the increased attention LGBTQI activist communities were dedicating to advocacy,

especially around repealing Section 377.<sup>154</sup> In the late 1990s and early 2000s, as public discourse became increasingly punctuated by sexuality, a series of homophobic events including the “Lucknow Four” and the “Pushkin Affair”<sup>155</sup> that were sensationalized by the media generated protests that consequently garnered their own media coverage. This new attention marked a significant shift for LGBTQI visibility, sparking an unprecedented public debate. These developments fostered an environment that was more open to the display of queer representation, thereby paving the way for Gupta’s entrée into India’s art world. In a solo exhibition at the India Habitat Centre explicitly about queer representation, he exhibited *Exiles* for the first time in India.<sup>156</sup> In 2004 Gupta encountered a new generation in New Delhi that was eager for change, and, at least among progressive circles in New Delhi, *Exiles* was positively received – a stark contrast to his experiences shooting *Exiles* in 1986. Although the show only lasted ten days, it transformed the exhibition space into a makeshift gathering for community building and creative action for Indian LGBTQI politics.

The success of the show as a space-making platform contributed to Gupta’s return to New Delhi, and for the next eight years he created new work alongside a burgeoning

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<sup>154</sup> Gupta, personal interview, February 2, 2014.

<sup>155</sup> In 1998, various Hindu fundamentalist groups associated with Shiv Sena and the Bharatiya Janata Party vandalized and stormed theaters across the nation showing the film *Fire* (1996) in an attempt to halt its viewing. This film is a diasporic production but features a lesbian love story set in India. In 2002, four HIV/AIDS protesters were arrested on the grounds of conspiracy to promote homosexuality. This case is popularly referred to as the “Lucknow Four.” In 2004, Pushkin Chandra and his lover Kuldeep were found murdered in Chandra’s New Delhi apartment, a tragedy that quickly became known as the “Pushkin Affair.”

<sup>156</sup> Radhika Singh, a friend and colleague of Gupta’s, was adamant about curating his work in India. To gain access to government funding, she developed a strategy to exploit the increasing involvement of NGOs in the nation and the overly-medicalized discourse around HIV/AIDS. While Singh organized programs that catered to these sources, she allocated leftover funds to Nigah, a community collective dedicated to positive queer visibility in New Delhi. They then organized a program of Gupta’s work, including *Exiles* (Radhika Singh, personal interview, July 10 2011.)

activist scene committed to queer visual politics in India. In fact, with the successful reception of *Exiles* in 2004 and the production of *Sun City* in 2010, Gupta has since developed a reputation as the most eminent contemporary queer artist tied to South Asia. Yet his endeavors in the region are not without precedent. In the 1980s, prior to *Exiles* (but not prior to Gupta producing queer imagery, which began in the 1970s), Indian modernist painter Bhupen Khakhar (1934–2003) began making work with explicitly homoerotic content. As Karin Zitzewitz remarks, this shift in imagery followed a visit to London in the late 1970s, after Khakhar came out of the closet and began exploring “practices of sex, intimacy, meaning, and secrecy associated with same-sex love as a social phenomenon and form of desire.”<sup>157</sup> In his painting *Two Men in Banares* (1982), two naked men caress tenderly behind a grey wall (figure 2.4). And although they appear hidden in a corner, framed only by their shadows, they are visibly aroused. In a scene mostly composed of dark browns and grays peppered by multi-colored domes, a cast of characters go about their daily routines: beggars who beg, vendors who sell their goods, and devotees who pray. Crucially, Khakhar offers a window into a scene of religious worship which he imbues with homoerotic possibility. In the painting’s middle ground Khakhar depicts a man prostrating before a lingam – the aniconic representation of the Hindu god, Shiva, that also reads as his sacred phallus. *Two Men in Banares* re-images communal space through illicit sexual desire, and as Zitzewitz observes, Khakhar’s paintings on homosexuality “critique the conditions of same-sex desire in contemporary India, in which practices of secrecy, and [...] falsehood are required.”<sup>158</sup> This logic

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<sup>157</sup> Karin Zitzewitz, *The Art of Secularism: the Cultural Politics of Modernist Art In Contemporary India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 132.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 127.

(around secrecy within the urban, or the open secret) resonates with *Exiles*, not only vis-à-vis its preservation of anonymity, but in the way Gupta's series inflects familiar, urban settings with gay desire. As such, Khakhar represents an important precedent to *Exiles*' conflation of sexuality, secrecy, and the urban space.

Stylistically diverse and a generation apart, Khakhar and Gupta compare as artists whose representations disrupt and nuance white, Eurocentric imaginations of queerness. However, *Exiles* does not only speak to an Indian idiom, and its picturing of racialized sexual desire is distinctly accessible through a diasporic lens. As a gay Indian man, living in London in the 1980s, Gupta often felt indirect pressure from the gay mainstream community to forsake his so-called cultural baggage.<sup>159</sup> He notes, "wherever we lived [in London], we were cut off from India and there was an overwhelming, deeply frustrated desire to claim some part of it for ourselves."<sup>160</sup> Thus, although *Exiles* reads as a portrayal of gay Indian men, Gupta's vision is inspired by autobiographical, transnational feelings of placelessness. In this way, *Exiles* generates a palpable connection between his lived experience in London as a gay man of color, and gay visibility in New Delhi. To be clear, Gupta does not draw facile parallels between London and New Delhi; rather I read his intervention as animating intersections between sexuality and the history of empire along a transnational axis. Needless to say, black LGBTQI communities in London and the gay population in New Delhi are differently conditioned in innumerable ways, with diverging relationships to access, especially with regard to public space and notions of collectivity. However, *Exiles* conceives a shared affective sense of not-belonging

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<sup>159</sup> Furthermore, choosing the gay white mainstream stifles consciousness-raising efforts within immigrant communities regarding their own struggles around homophobia.

<sup>160</sup> Gupta, *Pictures from Here*, 43.

between two communities in which Gupta finds queer kinship. In “Hauz Khas” from *Exiles*, the photograph’s accompanying caption summarizes the sitter’s personal thoughts: “It must be marvelous for you in the West with all your bars, clubs, gay liberation and all that.” From Gupta’s Black British perspective, the caption is ironic and functions to illuminate misperceptions about East, West, and sexual freedom. Within a queer of color studies framework, Gupta’s experiences of mainstream gay establishments in the UK have been stifling in their exclusionary whiteness. Arguably, the series speaks to a kinship perhaps as yet unrecognized between those who struggle – albeit in differently textured ways across geographic borders – with the impossibility of being simultaneously Indian *and* a sexual minority.

Thus, before delving into *Sun City*, it is important to emphasize that Gupta’s protagonist is an immigrant who roams the streets and bathhouse corridors of Paris, and a particular shot in the series emphasizes his alien status (figure 2.5). In the tightly framed shot, Gupta’s main character is in a park reading Victor Hugo. He turns to his lover, seeking help with translation, but finds him napping, giving him an expressive look of confusion – a scene misaligned with assimilative pressures imposed on new immigrants. Arguably, *Sun City*’s bathhouse scenes are more alluring for the protagonist as a site of sexual democracy where everyone ostensibly “speaks the same language” however, Gupta’s chosen setting is especially othering, as will become more evident given its highly orientalized interior. Thus, as I read *Sun City* as an exercise in camping orientalism that rethinks the role of race in representations of sexual desire, I ground my analysis in a queer diasporic positionality.

### Camping Orientalism in *Sun City*

In 2010, the Centre Georges Pompidou commissioned Sunil Gupta's *Sun City* for its blockbuster survey of contemporary Indian art, *Paris-Delhi-Bombay* (2011). Bearing in mind the show's curatorial mandate, which aimed to foster dialogue between Indian and French artists, Gupta loosely based his photo series on Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962). In this twenty-eight minute short film, composed almost entirely of photo stills, Marker's main character is a prisoner recruited into a time-travel experiment during which he revisits childhood memories and stories of lost love from his adolescence. He frets in particular over a memory of a woman on the observation platform at Orly Airport, a memory that succeeds another memory when he witnesses the mysterious death of an unknown man. Yet, when he tragically dies in the end, it becomes clear to the viewer that the death scene witnessed by the main character prior to his vision of the woman at Orly was in fact a scene of his own death – a scene from the future, haunting him all this time. Curiously, this “end” scene in *La Jetée* is also where Marker's film begins, thereby activating an elliptical loop to the film. In *Sun City*, Gupta retains the film's formal structure and makes this evident at the Pompidou by installing the photo series on all four walls of a single gallery room, forming an uninterrupted loop. *Sun City* also compares to *La Jetée* in terms of composition, including a death scene and a scene of embracing lovers – both of which are sited at Orly. And, as in *La Jetée*, where Gupta's narrative begins and ends remains ambiguous.

While *La Jetée* and *Sun City* parallel in significant ways, their points of contrast are even more illuminating, and ultimately demonstrate how my analysis of Gupta's chosen locale for his photo series deploys camping orientalism as an aesthetic strategy

that rethinks the visual relationship between race and desire, thereby expanding the conventional uses of an aesthetic sensibility like camp. First, rather than feature an incarcerated white man, Gupta recasts his main character as a gay Indian immigrant who is new to Paris. Second, instead of a series of high-contrast black and white photographs set in an existentially grim, post-apocalyptic Paris, Gupta situates his series in a vibrant, orientalized Parisian bathhouse named Sun City, which he dramatizes through over-emphasized bright lighting. Furthermore, Gupta's main character does not time-travel between frames, but shuttles between different kinds of spaces. On the one hand, *Sun City* features hedonistic, kitschy bathhouse scenes alongside public and private Parisian scenes that picture a routine, homonormative<sup>161</sup> love affair: scenes of the main character and an older French man reading at the park, shopping in a department store, or resting together in their beautifully designed modern home. Incidentally, one of Gupta's last bathhouse scenes includes a group of men attentively watching a flat screen television showing *La Jetée*'s death scene. By directly citing Marker, Gupta re-imagines *La Jetée*'s narrative from a temporal perspective back and forth to a spatial one. This spatial re-imagination is key. It is from this point of departure, the over-emphasized orientalized interior of the bathhouse, that I develop my analytical intervention: a camping of orientalism, that is to say, a queer aesthetic analysis of orientalist space that rethinks the relationship of race to sex as an under-examined colonial gaze vis-à-vis depictions of gay male desire.

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<sup>161</sup> For more on homonormativity, homonationalism, and homoliberalism, respectively, see Lisa Duggan, "The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism," in *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, ed. Russ Castronovo and Dana Nelson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism In Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Sara Warner, *Acts of Gaiety: LGBT Performance and the Politics of Pleasure* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012).



While reviews of *Paris-Delhi-Bombay* have criticized the show's exoticized framing of contemporary Indian art's place in globalized circuits of art production, the explicitly orientalized details of *Sun City* have oddly gone unseen. In fact, the two major sites of the series' reception – Paris, and then later in New Delhi in 2012 – have revolved around the main character's newfound sexual liberation and have evaded the spatial power dynamics in which this desire plays out. *Sun City* has been received as an open-ended narrative that comments on the risks of homonormative love set against the allures, yet dangers, of the bathhouse – a space that has become a symbolic backdrop for the threat of HIV/AIDS. Although these threats of infection resonate for an artist like Gupta, who has been HIV-positive for over twenty years, reading these campy bathhouse images exclusively as a celebration of sexual freedom overlooks how Gupta's camp orientalism makes evident the racial codedness of gay male desire. This limited framing that centers gay subjectivity at the expense of its colonial formations and residues sets up a problematic that I address through aesthetic analysis.

Although *Paris-Delhi-Bombay*'s curators Sophie Duplaix and Fabrice Bousteau aimed for an unprecedented collaboration between Indian and French artists, they manifested instead a familiarly unidirectional dialogue that “re-performed outdated and Western-centric categorizations of West and non-West.”<sup>162</sup> Despite an inventory of precedents alongside co-temporal projects, the exhibition produced a basic guide to India, reifying France's imaginary of India as a mysterious and unknown place.<sup>163</sup> Not

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<sup>162</sup> Tracy Buck, “Framing India: Paris-Delhi-Bombay..., Centre Pompidou, Paris,” *Museum Worlds* 1 (2013): 213.

<sup>163</sup> For several years now, contemporary Indian artists have left an indelible mark on the global art scene: *Kapital and Karma* (Vienna, 2002), *Edge of Desire* (Perth, New York, Berkeley, Mexico City, Monterrey, New Delhi, Mumbai, 2004–2007), *New Narratives: Contemporary Art from India* (Chicago, 2008), *Chalo!*

surprisingly, several reviews criticized the sprawling exhibition as a “behind the curve,”<sup>164</sup> ethnographic, and unoriginal survey of contemporary Indian art.<sup>165</sup> Furthermore, although the encyclopedic catalogue includes essays by respected scholars of modern and contemporary Indian art including Geeta Kapur, Deepak Ananth, Gayatri Sinha, Johan Pijnappel, Nancy Adajania, Kavita Singh, Pooja Sood, and Devika Singh, the French curators make a problematic case for renewing a sense of exoticism, emphasizing harmony in difference. For example, Duplaix’s essay “Who’s Afraid of Exoticism?” misinterprets “exotic” as merely signifying “unfamiliar,” and repurposes the infamous “-ism” by depoliticizing it. She suggests that in an increasingly globalized world, rethinking the term incites new modalities towards an aesthetics of diversity – a logic that naively discounts the power dynamics and processes of alienation embedded in encounters with the foreign. Considering these essentializing frameworks, it becomes clearer how the glaringly obvious details of *Sun City*’s orientalized décor – never mind its camp upending – have gone unseen.

Interestingly, the series’ 2012 reception in New Delhi also sidelined a critical analysis of *Sun City*’s chosen setting, albeit for different reasons. Crucially, Gupta created the series in the wake of the 2009 Section 337 repeal. On 2 July, the New Delhi High Court marked Indian LGBTQI history, and *Sun City* was received by a community

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(*Let’s Go!*) *India* (Tokyo and Seoul, 2008–2009), and *The Empire Strikes Back*, (UK, 2010), represent but a select few within the twenty-first century. Indeed, there have been major exhibitions of contemporary Indian art almost every year across the globe. In France alone, various initiatives include *Indian Summer* (Paris, 2005), *Bombay: Maximum City* (Lille, 2006), *Indian Contemporary Art* (Fécamp, 2009). Partly in concurrence with the Centre Pompidou exhibition, *Indian Highway IV* showed at the Lyon Museum of Contemporary Art.

<sup>164</sup> Harry Bellet and Philippe Dagen, “Paris-Delhi-Bombay – Review,” *The Guardian*, June 14, 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2011/jun/14/exhibition>.

<sup>165</sup> In addition to Buck, Kamdar, and Bellet and Dagen, see Zehra Jumabhoy, “Previews: Paris-Delhi-Bombay...” *ArtForum* (May 2011), 155; Shumi Bose, “Paris-Delhi-Bombay,” June 2, 2011, <http://www.domusweb.it/en/art/2011/06/02/paris-delhi-bombay.html>.

still elated over the legal decision. This is the context that informs Gupta's aesthetic labor for the Paris show. This is also the context that overshadows the formal nuances of the series that I assess. In 2012, the Alliance Française opened *Sun City* in New Delhi, but bullish Hindu fundamentalists, offended by the photos, forced a shutdown by police. In response, outraged activists, members of Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust (SAHMAT), and Nigah in particular, berated the Alliance Française for abandoning their invited artist and for conceding to outlaw communal pressures.<sup>166</sup> Because *Sun City* was censored for its sexual content, little attention was paid to the series' intersections with race and diaspora, let alone to its aesthetic interventions. What is more, the bathhouse acquired a geopolitical charge that perpetuated a simple dichotomy between places like Paris as open and places like New Delhi as not. However, in the context of the rapid globalization of gay culture in the age of pinkwashing, a conventional and unquestioned narrative that takes majoritarian queer culture as the point of origin and minoritarian culture as targets of discursive exchange is dangerously reductive.

*Sun City*'s reception has too narrowly focused on a narrative of sexual freedom, ignoring how the artist manipulates a very specific kind of spatial setting in order to inflect that narrative and those freedoms. By assessing *Sun City* as a camping of orientalism, I frame Gupta's chosen site as a formal decision that critiques rather than celebrates gay desire in the bathhouse. In doing so, Gupta transforms this otherwise overdetermined encounter between subject and space into one with the capacity to undermine

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<sup>166</sup> Neha Alawadhi, "Police Force Closure of Photo Exhibition on Paris Gay Life," *The Hindu*, March 29, 2012, accessed August 2, 2014.

<http://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Delhi/police-force-closure-of-photo-exhibition-on-paris-gay-life/article3257108.ece>.

Nigah Collective Statement, April 1, 2012, accessed August 2, 2014.

<http://kafila.org/2012/04/01/nigah-statement-condemning-the-shutting-down-of-sunil-guptas-exhibition-sun-city-other-stories/>.

the power dynamics at play. In the paragraphs to follow, I discuss *Sun City* in relation to orientalist tropes in academic painting to speak to the racial codedness of desire in the bathhouse. I link this discussion to Gupta's visual quoting of gay male erotic photography, and by attending to Gupta's parodic inversion, I inflect queer discourse in art history with a racialized lens. Poses inhabited within the campy orientalist setting of *Sun City*, it is this confluence of posture and place that I claim as camping orientalism.

*Sun City*'s ornate setting is spectacular in its orientalist imagination, and yet *Paris-Delhi-Bombay*'s exhibition catalog describes the "Indian décor"<sup>167</sup> of the bathhouse scenes as a familiar point of reference for the main character (figure 2.6). This position is not surprising given Duplaix's defense of exoticism. Needless to say, identifying the bathhouse as an orienting space for Gupta's protagonist seems ironic, if not in poor taste, given how its design engenders a cultural myth, conflating references vaguely associated with South Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East. Like countless nineteenth-century orientalist paintings, *Sun City*'s extravagant interior is a built-in contradiction. As a fantasy directly drawn from the history of orientalist painting – and its discursive links to the justification of European colonialist expansion and domination<sup>168</sup> – the series is familiar in its fetishizing echoes of the racialized other, while also distanced from any realistic referent. Consider for example Jean-Léon Gérôme's well-known *The Grand Bath at Bursa* (1885) and its chosen setting of an intimate space restricted to women (figure 2.7). As a white European man, Gérôme would not have had access to such

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<sup>167</sup> Louise Delestre, "Sunil Gupta," in *Paris-Delhi-Bombay*, ed. Sophie Duplaix and Fabrice Bousteau (Paris: Centre Pompidou), 220.

<sup>168</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978); Donald Rosenthal, *Orientalism, the Near East in French Painting, 1800–1800* (Rochester, NY: Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester, 1982); Linda Nochlin, "Imaginary Orient," in *Race-ing Art History: Critical Readings in Race and Art History*, ed. Kymberly Pinder (New York: Routledge, 2002).

homosocial realities, a hammam setting where women bathe and are bathed in the nude. Although *The Grand Bath at Bursa* is painted in a realistic manner, it is not observed from reality; it is a fabricated scene, a collage of fragments composed out of the artist's imagination. Given the painting's ethnographic detail and realist technique, however, the painting reads as documentary realism, a formal strategy that fueled by presumptions around cultural inferiority, stereotypes the Orient as naturalistically picturesque and as a believable spectacle of indulgence and sensuality. Furthermore, as the positioning of the main nude figure – the soft profile of her face, her slightly arched back, and contrapposto exaggerated by platform clogs to accentuate the view of her rear – stimulates colonial sexual fantasy, the presence and proximity of the black figure functions as a familiar trope that directs desire towards whiteness.

While postcolonial analyses of *The Grand Bath at Bursa* clarify the “look” of an orientalist aesthetic, the details of Gupta's chosen setting have yet to be critically examined as such. *Sun City* sets up a comparable dreamscape – note how the multi-leveled marble platform, framing arches in the background, and pristine blue basin all parallel Gérôme's composition. However, as in the case of orientalist painting, Gupta does not use documentary realism to mark and rationalize the space's encoded power dynamics. Instead his bright, garish lighting exceeds the documentation of the bathhouse's orientalist quotations, and in so doing accentuates the role of orientalism in framing gay desire. In *The Homoerotics of Orientalism* (2014) Joseph Allen Boone argues that, “whether feared or desired, the mere *possibility* of sexual contact with or between men in the [“Orient”] has covertly underwritten much of the appeal and practice

of the phenomenon we now call orientalism.”<sup>169</sup> Thus, Boone identifies homoerotic desire as a subtext to the pursuit of empire, and as queer studies scholar Hiram Pérez remarks in *A Taste for Brown Bodies* (2015), gay modern sensibilities continue to romanticize this irretrievable past, impressing their fantasies upon the brown body today.<sup>170</sup> Crucially, *Sun City*’s scenes do not take place in an artificially fabricated set, but are situated in an actual Parisian bathhouse – one of the largest in Europe – in use under the same name.<sup>171</sup> Boone and Pérez’s logic explains the appeal of a contemporary bathhouse that looks like Sun City, while also exposing how queer cruising does not occur in a vacuum but is highly regulated and racially codified in its sexual consumption.

Gérôme and Gupta’s nudes compare in the way they both invite an objectifying gaze through comparable staged set ups. After all, scenes like that in figure 2.6 offer a perspective of the bathhouse completely unavailable to a regular (predominantly white) patron since it is all too perfectly set up – a setup that recalls postures renown in queer art history. And so, on the one hand, Gupta’s chosen space, which speaks to orientalist traditions, uses camp lighting and colors to underscore the racial codedness of gay male desire. On the other hand, Gupta’s posing figures converse with gay photographic erotica that has come to frame the gay male body as an object of desire. Gupta uses bright lighting to intentionally amplify the space’s gaudiness, for example the ornate benches

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<sup>169</sup> Joseph Allen Boone, *The Homoerotics of Orientalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), xxi. As is evident with *The Grand Bath at Bursa*, orientalist painting overwhelmingly displays female, often Sapphic sensuality; however, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries also circulated widespread expressions of the homoerotic potential of male hammams, causing great scandal for the colonial imagination. Yet, for locals, the latent eroticism of the hammam as a single-sex world is embedded in a “transitional zone that link[s] religious mandated purification rituals [...] and for every boy, memories of his banishment from the comforting realm of the female bath on reaching puberty and simultaneous initiation into the competitive realities of male homosociality” (Ibid., 78).

<sup>170</sup> Hiram Pérez, *A Taste for Brown Bodies: Gay Modernity and Cosmopolitan Desire* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 9.

<sup>171</sup> Gupta’s protagonist is inspired by personal visits to Sun City, along with stories from other South Asian men he encountered in online chat rooms.

and archways that frame the water basins in figure 2.6, the pseudo-historic indophilic sculptural dolls found in the entrance as seen in figure 2.8, and the painted characters on locker doors that read as bad replicas of Indo-Islamic miniatures in figure 2.9. Within this brightly lit kitschiness, Gupta inhabits a set of poses, resituated and thus recontextualized.

In the highly orientalized setup of figure 2.6, nudes in poses familiar to queer art history surround the main character, though Gupta's most obvious visual quotation is centrally located. Positioned next to the seated protagonist, a nude directly references *Young Man Sitting by the Seashore* (1836), Jean Hippolyte Flandrin's famous neo-classical painting (figure 2.10). An unidentified Greek youth sitting on a rock with his arms wrapped around his legs, Flandrin's solitary nude rests his head on his knees with his eyes closed. While the painting has never explicitly suggested homoerotic intent, it has inspired several photographers invested in homoerotic representation to quote the enigmatic pose. In 1900, Wilhelm von Gloeden reproduces a careful reenactment with Biblical intonations, given his chosen title, *Cain* (figure 2.11). A platinum print from Fred Holland Day's late 1890s *Ebony and Ivory* series also interprets Flandrin's pose, this time betraying the photographer's taste for racial exoticism. As he instructs the sitter, a black laborer under his employment, to imitate Flandrin's pose and to sit with a Hellenistic war figurine made from white ivory, the figurine and the model echo each other as objects on display. Furthermore, they both rest on a leopardskin rug, reinforcing the exoticization of erotics. Finally, Robert Mapplethorpe also produces a stylized black nude in his gelatin silver print titled *Ajitto* from 1981 (figure 2.12). Although he does not include an animal-skin rug, Mapplethorpe's black nude is also propped on a pedestal in a way that emphasizes his subject's objecthood by explicitly exposing his penis. This

image is part of Mapplethorpe's infamous *Black Book* series that has been highly criticized for fetishizing blackness, specifically for perpetuating fantasies of the hypersexualized black male.<sup>172</sup>

Gupta participates in this set of reenactments, arguably fortifying the role of Flandrin's iconography within queer art history; however, the gaudy orientalist setting of *Sun City* camps this lineage. It is useful to think through the work of several scholars writing on camp and parody here. Linda Hutcheon theorizes parody as a process between texts that converses with but ultimately upends the coded discourse of one visual language for another. Moreover, parody often does so through an irreverent and ridiculing tone. Establishing difference at the heart of similarity, parody can also be mobilized to indicate power relationships between the various social agents wielding those texts.<sup>173</sup> Moe Meyer defines camp as queer parody, as a queer aesthetic sensibility and cultural critique that, in its surplus of performativity, undermines the constructedness of gender and sexuality.<sup>174</sup> Against Susan Sontag's apolitical approach to camp stylistics, camp has the capacity to challenge the dominant order that is made concrete through majoritarian gestural codes. In José Muñoz's words, camp "renders visible the mechanisms of privilege that [certain] subjectivities attempt to occlude."<sup>175</sup> Furthermore, as Pamela Robertson notes, camp often relies on stereotypes of racial difference to

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<sup>172</sup> In a series of essays, Kobena Mercer builds this argument, but then changes his mind and reads the series as a manifestation of desire for the black body (Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* [New York: Routledge, 1994]). However, alongside several scholars working on art history and blackness, I maintain that Robert Mapplethorpe's *Black Series* fetishizes the black gay male body.

<sup>173</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: the Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (New York: Methuen, 1985).

<sup>174</sup> Moe Meyer, "Reclaiming the Discourse of Camp," in *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*. ed. Moe Meyer (New York: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>175</sup> José Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999) 135.



achieve comic effect.<sup>176</sup> Indeed, both race and camp rely on artifice for legibility, and given orientalism's reliance on artifice, one can make productive connections to camp as well.<sup>177</sup> And yet, whereas postcolonial and feminist critiques in art history<sup>178</sup> deconstruct the Orient's artifice for its imperial and gendered logics, I read the artifice of poses in *Sun City* as an illuminating rendering of camp orientalism. Beyond mere quotation, *Sun City* repurposes and resituates poses that not only reveal the conventions dictating form, content, and style within queer photography, but how these conventions have incontrovertibly centered whiteness in desire. In this way, camping orientalism defuses the whiteness of camp, transforming it into a political conduit that is able to distance itself from oppressive stereotypes couched in a history of colonial objectification and sexual exoticism.

In another example, Gupta quotes a famous image from the 1940s by gay erotica photographer George Platt Lynes (1907–1955). Figure 2.13 stages a frank and sensuous scene on an unmade bed between two naked actors with beautifully sculpted physiques. In Gupta's reenactment, the classic black and white photograph is chromatically lit and a bright blue hue dominates the composition (figure 2.14). This loud blue echoes the light blue towels that many of the characters wear. If the bathhouse has been celebrated as a sexually democratic counter-site of equal opportunity, then the blue towels perpetuate

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<sup>176</sup> Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," in *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, 54; Pamela Robertson, "Mae West's Maids: Race, 'Authenticity', and the Discourse of Camp," in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: a Reader*, ed. Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999).

<sup>177</sup> While this logic may lead one to reduce all iterations of orientalism to camp, orientalism has an aesthetic range that is in fact quite broad, for example the Romanticists, the Pre-Raphaelites, versus *japonisme*, *chinoiserie*, and/or primitivism, etc.

<sup>178</sup> For example, as the cover art for Said's *Orientalism* (1978), Gérôme's *The Snake Charmer* has become an iconic distillation of how colonial ideology affects the reliability of realist depictions. Later, postcolonial feminist art historians like Linda Nochlin, Darcy Grigsby, and Abigail Solomon-Godeau launched their new perspectives by reviewing this painting as illustrative of the sexual charge undergirding colonialism. But as Boone remarks, the sexual charge is specifically homoerotic and pedophilic.

this ostensibly homogenizing experience. Yet the contrast between Gupta's two caressing figures is sharp and worth unpacking. Against a smooth, muscular, and hairless white physique rests the protagonist's brown, excessively hairy, softer build. If images like that of Platt Lynes perpetuate idealized notions of gay male beauty, then Gupta's quoted counterpart troubles their universalist pretense. Moreover, Gupta's interracial scene makes room for the possibility of other aesthetics across geographical borders to feed gay male desire and to reanimate queer art history anew. In *Brown Boys and Rice Queens* (2013) Eng Beng Lim theorizes the white, colonial fetishization of the Asian boy as a spellbinding encounter. Centering on this interracial encounter as a queer racialized performance that is mutually constitutive, spells are cast in either direction from "East" and "West," revealing how latent legacies of colonialism are still extant in queer modernity, while also generating a new way of discussing Asian masculinity, typically taken as invisible and asexual.<sup>179</sup> Lim's orientalist dyad, which conjures new critical perspectives within the homoerotics of empire, is a useful point of reference for this photograph. And yet, equally intriguing about Gupta's protagonist, he does not necessarily cast a spell on his audience or the white bodies that surround him. Gupta creates a scene in which the uncomfortability of desiring across ethnic lines, manifested by this contrast in body aesthetics, comes to the fore instead. The presence of the on-looking voyeur is key. As this third party leans in, his potential curiosity is mitigated by his muted expression and closed-off body language. And so, while Gupta's protagonist asserts his presence by disrupting the white gay male ideal, an air of hesitation imbues this triadic formation, and the posturing in figure 2.14 does not necessarily succeed in

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<sup>179</sup> Eng Beng-Lim, *Brown Boys and Rice Queens: Spellbinding Performance in the Asias* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 3-10.

reclaiming desire for brown bodies. I will return to the productivity of such failure shortly.

Returning to figure 2.8, only briefly mentioned above, Gupta quotes figure 2.15, an exemplar of von Gloeden's Greco-Roman homoerotic invocation. Gupta's image is a direct reflection of von Gloeden's photograph, titled *Bacchanal* – from the loincloth, to the placement of their hands and head, their contrapposto, even down to the way in which the main figures literally lean on their respective mythic backdrops. The details of *Bacchanal* – the architectural setting, the laurel wreath, the hanging jug, and the held goblet – conjure an image of ancient Rome as the revered site of pure form and ideal beauty in western civilization. Von Gloeden emulates this ancient world to legitimize a classical history to gay male desire. However, his desire to valorize gay erotics relies on creating a made-up scene, and Gupta picks up on this fantastical fiction, exaggerating it to parodic effect. By juxtaposing von Gloeden's setting against loud, indophilic dolls, Gupta camps the racial politics of gay male desire and the exoticism that undergirds its art historical representation.

Photographs in *Sun City* such as figures 2.6, 2.8, and 2.14 perform a racing of queer art history; iconic poses within queer art historical traditions are parodied by virtue of their inhabitation within a space accented by camp bright lighting and gaudy orientalist ornamentation. In figure 2.6, the over-emphasis of the space's orientalism inhabits a queer failure<sup>180</sup> that resists and disavows bathhouse protocols in an attempt to call out and

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<sup>180</sup> In *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), José Muñoz theorizes queer failure as a futurity and virtuosity that imagines other ways of being or world-making. For J. Halberstam, queer failure skirts around disciplinary knowledge reliant on normalization, routine, and tradition to undo normative modes structuring success which are limited by capitalist measures of human development (*Queer Art of Failure*, 2011). For more on queer failure, art, and aesthetics refer to Tina Takemoto, "Queer Art/Queer Failure," *Art Journal* 75, no. 1 (2016): 85–88.

undo its denigrating conventions. Although everyone strikes a highly contrived pose, no one touches or – most importantly – looks at each other or the main character; he himself blankly stares out, disengaged. As a result, the scene is stiff, tense, and unlike typical or idealized imaginations of cruising culture, the erotic dynamics here are not fleeting. Instead, Gupta creates what I consider to be a desexualized and consequently failed bathhouse scene. As Dianne Chisholm claims, cruising practices have the capacity to transform urban spaces “into a praxis of amplified perception and cognition”<sup>181</sup> and the bathhouse has been historicized as “the first urban space to afford gay men a site”<sup>182</sup> for such practices. Has the bathhouse failed our protagonist? It is this failure that I claim as also camp. Thus, alongside the racing of queer art history, this failure to “perform bathhouse,” to cruise in a highly orientalized space, also informs my concept of camping orientalism.

Camp generally involves exaggerated stylistics, yet I ground *Sun City*’s campiness in an exaggerated inaction: in the over-performance of Asian asexuality and undesireability, further heightened by the depiction of white uninterestedness. In the public imaginary, Asian queer sexuality is either made invisible or grossly caricatured.<sup>183</sup> The main character’s physique, for example, intentionally departs from Hollywood images (and those of Bollywood, which are increasingly influenced by western standards

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<sup>181</sup> Dianne Chisholm, *Queer Constellations: Subcultural Space in the Wake of the City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 1.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>183</sup> Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The “Manly Englishman” and the “effeminate Bengali” in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995); David L. Eng and Alice Y. Hom, *Q & A: Queer In Asian America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998); David L. Eng, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity In Asian America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001); Martin F. Manalansan, *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men In the Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Tan Hoang Nguyen, *A View From the Bottom: Asian American Masculinity and Sexual Representation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014); Eng-Beng Lim, *Brown Boys and Rice Queens: Spellbinding Performance in the Asias* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

of beauty) that celebrate muscular toning and hairless physiques. The protagonist's soft build and non-epilated body is not idealized despite being commonplace within a South Asian imaginary. Situated within an orientalized interior, these averted gazes and non-touching bodies not only embody how racialized formations and residues impose themselves onto sexual desire, but they camp, that is to say, gesture towards undoing, in the form of performative excess, the "racial and sexual abjection"<sup>184</sup> undergirding queer Asian asexualization. Indeed, it is this excess (paradoxically, through lack) that ultimately renders Gupta's homo-orientalist imagery camp, "a strategic response to the breakdown of representation that occurs when a queer, ethnically marked, or other subject encounters his or her inability to fit within the majoritarian representational regime."<sup>185</sup>

As the main character enters *Sun City*, he does so as a queer racialized object of desire. His mere presence in the bathhouse embodies the site's insatiable sexual appetite inflected by the history of colonialism, thereby functioning as a mirror, reflecting the fetishization of race in gay male desire. As such, his presence is dissonant, out-of-sync (because he is not made to belong or be desired), and given the tragic and inevitable last scene of *Sun City*, mentioned briefly at the onset of this article, his presence is always already in the process of dying or unbecoming. Crucially though, *Sun City* does not categorically frame the main character as a victim of racially coded desire. In scenes figures 2.16 and 2.17 the protagonist "performs bathhouse" by actively participating as a subject of sexual consumption. The darkly lit and tightly framed shots set the stage for a sultry and seedy capture, yet these scenes portray arousal unconvincingly. Whether he is engaging in penetration while strapped to a wall harness or receiving oral sex, an

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<sup>184</sup> Takemoto, "Queer Art," 88.

<sup>185</sup> Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 128.

undeniable awkwardness imbues his demeanor. The main character's blank unaffected stare, coupled with his listless body, fails to convey the raw and crude appeal generally associated with the bathhouse. Rather, the acts are still, highly posed, and as such contrived. The intimacy expressed is so unconvincing, the viewer cannot deny the role played by artifice in animating sexual desire in *Sun City*. Such forced postures bring attention to the unease and anxiety that accompany some who navigate the bathhouse, begging the question: whose queer space is the bathhouse?

### Conclusion

Both of Sunil Gupta's photo series *Exiles* and *Sun City* play with the optics of documentation. At first glance, *Exiles* is received as documentary but is in fact a set of staged shots. On the other hand, *Sun City*'s gaudy orientalist setting and posturing read as spectacle and yet this bathhouse is, in fact, an actual space in regular use. Gupta plays with what is "real" and what is suspended from reality in different ways, accomplishing two distinct but related series. In *Exiles*, the realities of gay male desire in 1980s India are so highly censored, staged documentary becomes a vehicle through which one can begin to record and generate commentary on the visual logics of that invisibility. By contrast, as a spectacularized setting and an over-performed asexuality, *Sun City*'s camp orientalism deploys aesthetic strategies to call out and undo racial fetish in sexual desire. Yet the reception of *Sun City* has categorically ignored the homoerotic specters of orientalism. Ostensibly, blockbuster shows about contemporary Indian art located in major art institutions such as the Pompidou have become possible due to the rise of contemporary international art, a category that emerged out of the global turn in the art world which

saw previously marginalized content and production, namely art considered to be located from within the Global South, begin to be assessed on comparable platforms. And yet, this is not only an incomplete narrative that ascribes a provincialism to non-western art prior to 1989 but, paradoxically, this shift in the art world has tended to prescribe and police what cultural difference should look like according to what is marketable and legible as appropriately ethnic.<sup>186</sup> These are the institutional forces that have allowed Gupta to exhibit at the Pompidou, and equally they are the forces that that have obscured the more subversive aspects of his work. What is expected of Gupta and what is marketable in the globalized art world is an image of India seeking sexual freedom, not one that is poking fun or interrogating that freedom. While using appropriative techniques in contemporary art is common practice, and while critiquing the colonial gaze is by now quite rehearsed, Gupta's turn to camp reorients this gaze by undermining the assumption that queer communities across borders are in uncomplicated solidarity with one another through a reductive axis of queer sexual liberation. If the Orient and the "taste for brown bodies" are but an imaginary, Gupta's camp dares to imagine otherwise.

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<sup>186</sup> Art historians such as Iftikhar Dadi and Sonal Khullar have argued that the art world was global long before 1989. That is to say, artists were developing a cosmopolitan and transnational aesthetic alongside anti-colonial efforts, prior to independent movements in South Asia, and hence prior to the rise of postcolonial theories.

## IMAGES



Figure 2.1

Sunil Gupta. “Connaught Place” from *Exiles*, 1986. Color C-type print.

Caption: This operates like a pick-up joint. People don’t want to talk, they just want to get it off.



Figure 2.2

Sunil Gupta, “Jama Masjid” from *Exiles*, 1986. Color C-type print.

Caption: I love this part of town. It’s got such character and you can have sex just walking in the crowd.





Figure 2.3

Sunil Gupta, “India Gate” from *Exiles*, 1986. Color C-type print.

Caption: Even if you have a lover you should get married and have children. Who would look after you in old age?



Figure 2.4

Bhupen Khakhar. *Two Men in Banares*, 1982. Oil on canvas.



Figure 2.5  
Sunil Gupta. From *Sun City*, 2010. Digital print.



Figure 2.6  
Sunil Gupta. From *Sun City*, 2010. Digital print.





Figure 2.7  
Jean-Léon Gérôme. *The Grand Bath at Bursa*, 1885. Oil on canvas.

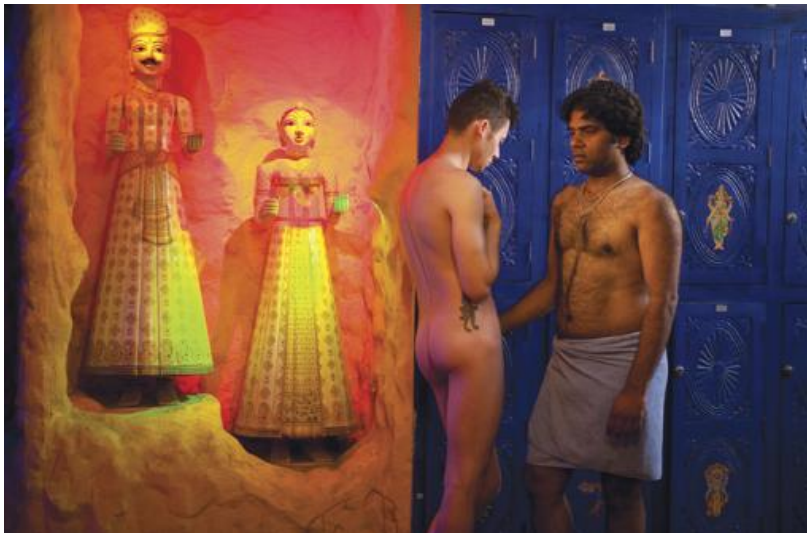


Figure 2.8  
Sunil Gupta. From *Sun City*, 2010. Digital print.



Figure 2.9  
Sunil Gupta. From *Sun City*, 2010. Digital print.



Figure 2.10  
Hippolyte-Jean Flandrin. *Nude Youth Sitting by the Sea*, 1836. Oil on canvas.



Figure 2.11  
Wilhelm von Gloeden. *Untitled (Cain)*, c. 1902.

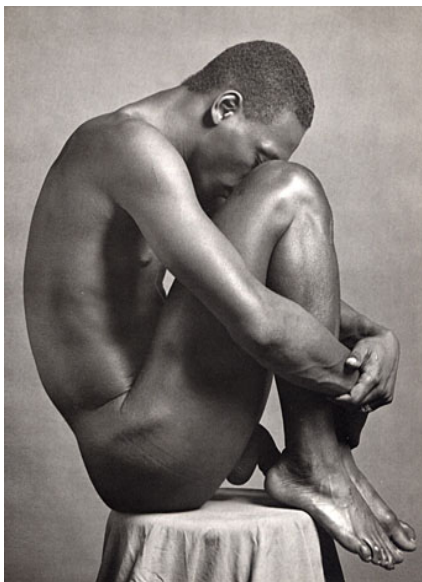


Figure 2.12  
Robert Mapplethorpe. *Ajitto* 1981. Silver gelatin print.



Figure 2.13  
George Platt Lynes, *Male Nudes*, n.d.



Figure 2.14  
Sunil Gupta. From *Sun City*, 2010. Digital print.





Figure 2.15  
Wilhelm von Gloeden. *Bacchanal*, c. 1890s.



Figure 2.16  
Sunil Gupta. From *Sun City*, 2010. Digital print.



Figure 2.17  
Sunil Gupta. From *Sun City*, 2010. Digital print.



### CHAPTER THREE

#### Chitra Ganesh: Re-imagining Goddess Iconography in Myth and Science Fiction

In chapter one my exhibition history analysis historicizes art in the age of identity and the elision of play, while chapter two investigates two photography series by Sunil Gupta as cases of unexamined playfulness. This chapter presents another case study of playful aesthetics in the visual culture of difference, this time on the work of New York-based visual artist Chitra Ganesh. It examines how two of her major artworks – *Tales of Amnesia* (2002), a zine in the form of an artwork, and *Eyes of Time* (2014), a site-specific mural and installation – re-imagine goddess iconography in myth and science fiction. *Tales of Amnesia* marks a critical turning point in Ganesh's work, where the goddess and variations of the feminine form become central to her practice. Although earlier paintings display an investment in female figures and in the boundary between human and non-human forms, the goddesses in *Tales of Amnesia* stand out for their comic book aesthetic.<sup>187</sup> This more accessible and familiar delivery makes the artist's audience more open not only to her political commentary, but to its upending strategies as well. Trained in art semiotics and visual art, Ganesh has developed a characteristic style of drawing that troubles the semiotic and ideological underpinnings of mythological iconography, allowing her to create her own mythographies that give rise to a new narrative logic. And yet, because Ganesh came of age in New York City during the 1990s – the heyday of identity politics – and because her practice often mobilizes figurative images from a recognizably “South Asian” cultural lexicon, the pull to emphasize the “foreign” content

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<sup>187</sup> For an analysis of Ganesh's earlier work, see: Sarita Heer, “Re-Imaging Indian Womanhood: The Multiple Mythologies of Phoolan Devi” (PhD dissertation, University of Illinois, 2014), 95–150.

of her work is strong. For example, critics more often associate her use of Hindu goddess imagery with her diasporic Indian background than with her interest in storytelling, fantasy, and myth – a distinction she has had to re-iterate in interviews.<sup>188</sup> This echoes the experience of many artists of color in contemporary art, who are similarly pressured to tie their aesthetic labor to their cultural origins in legible, and thus reductive, ways.

Nevertheless, insightful investigations of her work from outside the discipline of art history evidence the use of (and indeed the need for) an interdisciplinary lens with regard to the visual culture of difference. Articles by queer and diaspora studies scholar Gayatri Gopinath allude to the affective spillage of her queer feminine forms, while anthropologist Svati Shah makes a compelling case for reading Ganesh's work as an institutional critique of art history vis-à-vis the burden of representation.<sup>189</sup> Building on these analytical interventions, I emphasize her investment in fantasy as a political resource with the capacity to "imagine otherwise." In line with Ramzi Fawaz's theorization of fantasy, Ganesh's goddess iconography expands the bounds of what is politically possible and imaginable. In the introduction, I draw on Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*, which interprets play as a state of suspension. Huizinga claims that this state of suspension offers ideal conditions to reframe the status quo; and fantasy proposes such suspended and innovative forms of reality.

Through citational play, intertextual dialog, and an aberration of conventional image and text relations, *Tales of Amnesia* unpacks familiar goddess iconography in

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<sup>188</sup> Alex Zafiris, "Chitra Ganesh: Of This Time," <https://www.guernicamag.com/of-this-time/>

<sup>189</sup> Gayatri Gopinath, "Chitra Ganesh's Queer Re-Visions," *GLQ* 15, no. 3 (2009), 469–80; Svati Shah, "Knowing 'The Unknowns': The Artwork of Chitra Ganesh," *Feminist Studies* 37, no. 1 (2011), 111–126.

South Asia (formations such as “goddess as nation”), while also divorcing goddess iconography from the political and ideological arena from which it emerges – more precisely, the hetero-patriarchal and nationalist co-opting of myth. The zine mobilizes queer feminist desire within a fantasy setting, thus troubling diasporic attachment to home and nation. Moreover, Ganesh engenders a queer form of storytelling that distorts the conventions of the comic book genre and the very conventions that have come to codify retellings of mythological stories. Ultimately, I show how Ganesh undoes the semiotic and ideological logic that underpins comics and myth to engender another kind of storytelling: one that does not necessarily disavow the relationship between image and text, but that revels in the encrypted knowledge conjured by their dissonance. Prior to delving into *Tales of Amnesia*’s interventions, I begin by contextualizing Ganesh’s investment in fantasy and storytelling in her work with the queer Asian American art collective SLAAAP!!

Finally, I end this chapter by analyzing *Eyes of Time*, a temporary and site-specific mural and installation that exhibited at the Brooklyn Museum of Art in 2014–2015. In *Eyes of Time* Ganesh transforms the mythic into the science fictional. Where the fantastical context of myth is often limited by ideological and semiotic confines, the fantastical context of science fiction offers unexplored openings. Ultimately I argue that Ganesh manipulates goddess iconography to create a concept of a cybergoddess that serves as a metaphor for disrupting the future of museal display.

### SLAAAP!!, Fantasy, and Fawaz's "Imagining Otherwise"

In chapter one I examine how a progressive South Asian diasporic community emerged in New York City during the 1990s and redefined the category "diaspora," taking it beyond the realm of cultural heritage and unpacking the American imperialist legacies that undergirded South Asian American immigration history and population control. This period would prove to be a formative time for Chitra Ganesh, who was coming of age as an artist and activist during this period. In 1997 she completed a BA in Art Semiotics at Brown University and returned to New York City, where she is from and where she is now based, to complete her MFA at Columbia. Joining a number of new initiatives oriented towards grassroots organizing, such as SAWCC (South Asian Women's Creative Collective), SALGA (South Asian Lesbian and Gay Association), and YSS (Youth Solidarity Summer) – which I mention in chapter one – she also became an integral part of the artist collective SLAAAP!! (Sexually Liberated Asian American Activist People!!). Active from 1997 to 2001, SLAAAP!! was a queer Asian arts-activist collective (emerging from APICHA – Asian and Pacific Islander Coalition on HIV/AIDS) that collaborated with several community-based organizations centering queer of color politics, including the Audre Lorde Project, GAPIMNY (Gay Asian and Pacific Islander Men of New York), SALGA, and Kilawin Kolektibo, the first Philippine lesbian organization in the US. As an acronym that consistently included two exclamation points, SLAAAP!! marked itself as a loud, onomatopoeic statement. Like an expletive, one could not help but take notice. This embodied boldness characterizes the politics of recognition that dominated public discourse around the formation of art in the

age of identity during the 1980s and 1990s in London and New York City. Yet the work and contributions of SLAAAP!! have not been sufficiently historicized in this way.

For the most part, artists involved in SLAAAP!! created activist print media – postcards, publically displayed billboards, and guerilla poster campaigns that addressed a multiple intersections within queer Asian American communities: racism in mainstream white gay communities, homophobia within communities of color, and the impact of HIV/AIDS awareness on immigration policy. For example, one of the collective's final poster campaigns, *Recognize* (2001), organizes image and text around a family tree under the heading: "Someone you love is queer. Recognize the diversity within your family" (figure 3.1). The poster depicts two women playing under a large tree with expansive, spreading branches. The two women are looking up, directing the viewer's gaze to the leaves above them where a cluster of images and text are laid out. The images, portraits donated by queer-identified Asian Americans with openly and ambiguously gay family members, interact with speech bubbles that imagine accompanying queer narratives. Beside a black-and-white portrait of a man, for example, the accompanying text reads: "This photo of my uncle was taken by his best friend. The whole family knew they were lovers, and no one spoke about it. But I'm the only one who knows he's living with HIV." In another photograph, a contemporary shot in color, the accompanying text reads: "My distant cousin is a famous model and guys drool over her. No one knows she used to be a guy." Text and image combine to generate awareness around gender presentation, sexuality, and illness within Asian American communities. *Recognize* also creates an alternate family history and genealogy that foregrounds a sense of humanity to familiar

brown faces with “unfamiliar” subject positions (to straight Asian immigrant communities).

As part of *Crossing the Line* (2001), an exhibition of site-specific works organized by the Queens Museum of Art in collaboration with New York City’s MTA, SLAAAP!! exhibited its *Recognize* posters for six months (from April to October) across various working-class immigrant neighborhoods in Queens such as Jackson Heights, Elmhurst, Woodhaven, and Flushing.<sup>190</sup> This public installation aimed to engage community members in spaces where they felt safe and hence potentially more open to the catalytic messages embedded in *Recognize*. The posters were installed at bus stops, making public engagement especially inevitable. While waiting for the bus, one had no choice but to encounter and potentially spend time with the image. Through this public confrontation, SLAAAP!! intended to change the minds of an unsuspecting neighborhood, or at the very least force unintended re-imaginings of what is possible.

Thinking through how SLAAAP!!’s poster campaigns deploy fantastical settings towards political ends, Ramzi Fawaz’s concept of imagining otherwise is illuminating. In *The New Mutants* (2016), Fawaz explores “fantasy’s unique ability to [...] unravel existing frameworks in order to present new ways of perceiving the world.”<sup>191</sup> Fawaz constructs his conception of fantasy from the three main schools of thought on the subject. Psychoanalytic theory views fantasy as a psychic wellspring of desires expressed in imagined scenarios that potentially fulfill unconsummated wishes. Genre studies

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<sup>190</sup> The work now lives in the Museum’s permanent collection.

<sup>191</sup> Ramzi Fawaz, *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 28.

examines fantasy as a mode of storytelling that destabilizes traditional conceptions of reality by making the impossible appear possible or imminent. Marxist theory, meanwhile, offers two explanations: on the one hand, fantasy is akin to ideology or false consciousness “that actively mystifies the real conditions of social and economic hierarchy”; on the other hand, fantasy relates to utopia, allowing one to conceive of alternate worlds that resist the limits of the present (especially those imposed by class hierarchy). Although the subversive potential of fantasy is implied in all three schools of thought, fantasy nevertheless remains located within a singular pre-determined structure – be it the unconscious, narrative, or ideology, respectively. Building on these traditions, Fawaz argues for a more open-ended politics of fantasy. In particular, he focuses on comic books as a dynamic set of aesthetic *and* social phenomena, as a mode of communication with specific tropes (such as magic, superhuman abilities, time travel, and alternative universes) that stitch real-world social and political relations together with impossible happenings. Appearing “out of reach *within* the terms of dominant political imaginaries,”<sup>192</sup> this conception of fantasy mobilizes modes of enchantment and wonder in an attempt to expand what is imaginable.<sup>193</sup> Fawaz does not conceive of fantasy as pure imagination, but as a political resource with the capacity to “imagine otherwise.”<sup>194</sup> SLAAAP!!’s political posters rely on Fawazian fantasy to imagine possibilities for the ostensibly impossible, especially within a mainstream Asian American and immigrant context.

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<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid., 14.

By 2001, SLAAAP!!'s individual members were pursuing separate endeavors, and the collective eventually stopped collaborating. Shortly after, Ganesh made *Tales of Amnesia* (2002), which picks up on the fantastical re-imaginings of *Recognize*. In the sections to follow, my analysis of playful intertextuality and narrative dissonance in *Tales of Amnesia* connects to SLAAAP!!'s embrace of Fawazian fantasy – the capacity to imagine otherwise. Produced in an edition of 150 self-published comic books and as individual C-prints in editions of five, *Tales of Amnesia* is considered to be the first iteration of Ganesh's characteristic comic aesthetic. Building on myth-making and fantasy as a political aesthetic strategy – an approach that she developed during her time with SLAAAP!! – *Tales of Amnesia* combines myth with comics in a way that deconstructs both their organizing structures. Before delving into a close analysis of the zine, though, this confluence of myth and comics is worth pursuing.

### The Confluence of Myth and Comics

Both mythology and comics have been theorized as semiological practices that have been put to ideological use. Myths – often creation tales that explain the origin of a nation, culture, or people – use and create a rich metaphorical language and fantastical setting to understand observed phenomena and to answer age-old questions, about who we are and why we exist, that persist over generations and across cultures. Indeed,



numerous scholars across various fields have theorized on the common threads and tropes in myth.<sup>195</sup>

In *Mythologies* (1957), Roland Barthes reads myth as a semiotics, arguing that it constitutes a formal mode of signification – the architecture of meaning and ideas. Beyond a set of cultural tales limited to content, Barthes reads myth as an animated sequence of signs, a signifying practice with a meaningful structure. In his words, “myth is a type of speech [...] a system of communication, that is a message.”<sup>196</sup> And so, while myth communicates various aspects of cultures, be it through textual or visual representation, it is also a system of communication; it is this semiological notion of myth that illuminates the process through which certain objects, ideas, and narratives become mythologized. Thus, traditional myths do not simply tell engaging stories, but spread messages around ideas and ideals. In this way, there is an ideological foundation to how mythologies use cultural codes to create meaning.<sup>197</sup>

Consider, for example, the ideological construction of the Hindu goddess as an allegory for nationhood. In her book *Goddess and the Nation* (2009), which maps how the national territory sought visual form through the goddess, Sumathi Ramaswamy observes that the figure of Bharat Mata (or Mother India) appears for the first time in the work of the Bengal School artist Abanindranath Tagore (figure 3.2). Although the face of Tagore’s painting from 1905 is arguably modeled on the everyday Bengali woman, her

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<sup>195</sup> These sources in particular have been useful to my understanding of myth: Claude Lévi-Strauss and Wendy Doniger, *Myth and Meaning* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995) – a series of talks originally broadcast on the CBC Radio series *Ideas* in December, 1977; Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949); Carl Jung, *Man and his Symbols* (New York: Doubleday, 1964); Eric Csapo, *Theories of Myth* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).

<sup>196</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 109.

<sup>197</sup> Csapo, *Theories of Mythologies*, 276–77.

divine stature is evidenced by the white halo, her meditative gaze, and her multiple arms, which hold symbols of self-determination. And while Tagore's rendition gives luminescent form to the goddess, representing her as a hopeful beacon of light, because she was "envisioned in the throes of [anti-colonial] unrest"<sup>198</sup> she is fundamentally mobilized as nationalist propaganda.

Ramaswamy examines popular visual culture to trace how the notion of "goddess-as-nation" became a familiar point of reference within the public imaginary, examining the emergence, iconographic formation, and deification process of Mother India as a product of the age of mechanical reproduction.<sup>199</sup> She presents examples of how national iconography embodies a gendered and divinized form by looking at images that anthropomorphize the map of India. In figure 3.3 from circa 1947 – importantly, the year of independence – the body of the mother/goddess, along with the flows of her tricolor sari, are carefully arranged to resemble the cartographic shape of the new nation-state. Indeed, the geo-body of the country and of the mother/goddess are rendered interchangeable.

It is crucial to note that Bharat Mata is a very specific type of feminine icon, one that inevitably perpetuates hetero-patriarchal forms of reproduction. If the red bindi on her forehead marks her status as a married woman (though to whom exactly remains

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<sup>198</sup> Sumathi Ramaswamy, *The Goddess and the Nation: Mapping Mother India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 15.

<sup>199</sup> For more on woman as nation in India, refer to: Ramaswamy; Geeti Sen, *Feminine Fables: Imaging the Indian Woman in Painting, Photography, and Cinema* (Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing, 2002); Reeta Chowdhari Tremblay, "Representation and Reflection of Self and Society in the Bombay Cinema," *Contemporary South Asia* 5, no. 3 (November 1996): 303–318.

ambiguous), then her naming and her frontal, *darsanic*<sup>200</sup> posture mark her as the divine mother with whom the audience is encouraged to have a direct engagement. And, as the politics of respectability ordain for wives and mothers (mortal or divine), she is understood as a giver of life, a provider for her people, and a protector from evil.

A popular source that evidences the confluence between this specific kind of femininity and Hindu nationalism is the comic book series *Amar Chitra Katha*, which narrates mythological and historical tales of the subcontinent (figures 3.4 and 3.5). First published in 1967,<sup>201</sup> *Amar Chitra Katha* would be the first comic book to feature Indian figures and stories. With over 440 titles and sales of over ninety million issues to date, the publication's archive is not only vast but pervasive, circulating throughout the South Asian diaspora.<sup>202</sup> Karline McLain's anthropological study examines how *Amar Chitra Katha* first constructs, and then mythologizes, national heroes in the service of Hindu nationalist propaganda. The comics achieve this by rendering the narration of Hindu myth indistinguishable from Indian history: classical Sanskrit narratives of deities, kings, and devotional poets are comparable in their description (of national heroes) to narratives about colonial freedom fighters – a conflation with severe ideological repercussions.<sup>203</sup> With the rise of the Hindu Right during the 1980s, storylines subtly imbricate Hindu epics and struggles of independence, which problematically interpret history from a

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<sup>200</sup> *Darshan* refers to an opportunity or occasion of seeing a holy person or the image of a deity.

<sup>201</sup> It was published by Anant Pai of India Book House. *Amar Chitra Katha* is still running with 440 titles and 90 million issues to date.

<sup>202</sup> Karline McClain, *India's Immortal Comic Books: Gods, Kings, and Other Heroes* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 2.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, 2–3.

strictly Hindu perspective.<sup>204</sup> Hence, despite various bouts of secessionism, communalism, and linguistic and cultural chauvinism across regions, the desire for a single discourse around a unified postcolonial India has taken precedence, and examples in mass culture such as the *Amar Chitra Katha* series reflect these political ideologies.

Within this nationalist and Hindu imaginary, heroines fit a predictable mold. Demure, obedient, and saintly archetypes such as the mythic Shakuntala, who embody virtues like wifely devotion and fortitude amidst suffering, emulate this mold. If *Amar Chitra Katha*'s archetypal male hero is dominant, brave in the face of adversity, physically strong, and morally virtuous (for example Lord Rama and his bow and arrow in figure 3.5), then the archetypal heroine is also morally virtuous in her patience and devotion, as well as physically beautiful (specifically, light-skinned, slender, and scantily clad); she is also secondary in character and plot (notice Sita's positioning *behind* Rama in figure 3.5). *Amar Chitra Katha* represents the ideal woman as either long-suffering or self-sacrificing. And, problematically, the series presents these ideals as a matter of personal and heroic choice<sup>205</sup> – a choice that its readership is encouraged to emulate. Finally, when fiercer a embodiment of the goddess is invoked, for example Durga, she is

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<sup>204</sup> While *Amar Chitra Katha*'s form draws on western traditions of storytelling, its content derives from Indian visual and literary culture, especially that of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century when popular images were mobilized in the struggle for independence in 1947. In the 1960s and 1970s, the first generation of comic book readers comprised a young English-speaking community growing up in middle class families during a time when the newly urbanized parts of India were becoming less and less exposed to traditional religious instruction; *Amar Chitra Katha* served as a formative teaching tool. However, by the 1980s and 1990s, when Hindu nationalism gained prominence among the middle class, the ideological undertones of the series' heroic adventures became more explicit. In *Sculpting a Middle Class: History, Masculinity, and Amar Chitra Katha in India* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2010), Deepa Sreenivas examines how popular culture came to promote the rise of right wing politics developing in the nation. Disenchanted with the various unfulfilled promises of Nehruvian ideology, many started leaning towards Hindu nationalism. Retroactive claims to a mythic and glorious past began to take root, and *Amar Chitra Katha* was complicit in this illusory construction.

<sup>205</sup> McLain, *India's Immortal Comic Books*, 77.

not framed as the unconsorted warrior she actually is, but as a mere instrument for the agendas of the male gods, for example in a battle they cannot win without her intervention.

As an example of the comics-meets-myth genre, *Amar Chitra Katha* demonstrates a confluence between the two storytelling forms. And like myth, comics also speak to the ideological underpinnings of semiotic form. Never merely illustrative, comics have been analyzed as complex and encoded texts that disclose the underlying structures of visual narrative.<sup>206</sup> Comics do this by simplifying the visual field and narrative voice in order to render accessible the correlations between image and text to a mass audience. Scholars like Will Eisner and Scott McCloud deconstruct how various elements such as drawing style, spacing, gestures, facial expressions, image–text relations, and the use of color versus black and white contribute to comics as a signifying practice.<sup>207</sup> Furthermore, as each panel displays frozen moments in time, they are cohesive enough for the imagination to fill the gaps, constructing the illusion of a continuous and unified narrative – a continuity that has ideological consequences. We see this teleology play out in the way *Amar Chitra Katha* casts goddesses as allegories for purity, for example. These ideological consequences manifest in other comic traditions as well, such as the way the Silver Age of superhero comic books in the United States during the 1950s and 1960s reflected cold war anxieties. Thus, while comics offer another form of history writing

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<sup>206</sup> Structuralist perspectives study comic narratives for their grammar and as mythological systems (e.g. Barthes, Lévi-Strauss, Hunig, etc) or as a graphic language system. Will Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art* (Tamarac: Poorhouse Press, 1985) is a pioneering study that defined comics as a coded and sequential language. Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (Northampton: Kitchen Sink Press, 1993) describes the formal apparatus and grammar of comics, including style, spacing of panels, closure time, gesture, image, text, and color.

<sup>207</sup> McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 30–42; Eisner, *Comics & Sequential Art*.

beyond the conventions of scholastic textbooks, their superheroes have been complicit in propagandizing nationalist and other ideological myths.

Words and pictures in comics share a mutually illustrative, interdependent relationship. Yet, precisely because of the simplicity and straightforward quality of the genre, the opportunity to resist the mass consumption of its ideological messages is also made possible with minimal effort. Given how the medium is based in character iconography, it is well suited to break down, problematize, and introduce new vocabulary around the very pejorative stereotypes it helps establish.<sup>208</sup> In this way, comics have the capacity to destabilize a system of signs. Various traditions of independent comics such as underground, alternative, or comix have experimented with treating comics as a constellation, a set of heterogeneous signs that disavows unity in an attempt to parody how signs, images, and reality conventionally relate to one another.<sup>209</sup> As a result, novel usages for comics have emerged, inspiring imaginative forms of storytelling with the potential to undo previously imposed barriers. Additionally, a social analysis of comics assesses the genre's capacity for portraying issues of identity, including race, nationality, generational location, gender, and sexuality. Beyond a symbolic exhuming of historically marginalized narratives, comics – in their capacity to decode and contest images and objects of everyday ideology within resistant visual culture – can reframe and transform

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<sup>208</sup> Consider how social and political satire have relied on caricaturizing difference for comic effect. See Elizabeth Childs, *Daumier and Exoticism: Satirizing the French and the Foreign* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004).

<sup>209</sup> Ole Frahm, "Weird Signs: Comics as Means of Parody," in *Comics and Culture: Analytical and Theoretical Approaches to Comics*, ed. Anne Magnussen and Hans-Christian Christiansen (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2000), 177.

how image and text relations do identity, and by extension narratives of resistance or rights.<sup>210</sup>

Given that comics comprise Fawaz's main archive of inquiry, his ideas around fantasy are useful here. He argues that in America, "comic books used fantasy to describe and validate previously unrecognizable forms of political community by popularizing figures of monstrous difference whose myriad representations constituted a repository of cultural tools for a renovated liberal imaginary."<sup>211</sup> He observes that during the Silver Age of comics, superhuman transformation (e.g. Superman) affected understandings of what it meant to be human and consequently a national citizen. Consequently, the post-WWII emergence of mutant, cyborg, and alien superheroes in comic books broke with the traditional aesthetic parameters of the superhero genre by staging a surprise encounter with the unknown. A new kind of political community was inspired by the refusal to conform to socially legible norms. Fawaz not only celebrates these new heroic identities and unconventional alliances as visual allegories for racial, gendered, and sexual minorities, but re-conceives them "as figures who sought alliances based on shared ethical goals."<sup>212</sup> That is to say, rather than think of comic book mutants as metaphors for otherness, Fawaz focuses on their alliances and ethos of radical difference as a vehicle through which to imagine political alternatives anew. Indeed, Fawaz is a critical

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<sup>210</sup> According to Jacqueline Danziger-Russell in *Girls and their Comics* (2012), comics comprise an ideal forum for the expression of marginalized and silenced voices, given the many methods they use to convey narratives. This includes interior and silent voices that have the capacity to manifest thoughts and feelings of those who cannot speak for themselves or are otherwise ignored within larger narratives. Comics assess text and image, the verbal narrative and the emotional impact of the images with equal measure. Furthermore, independent comics, which are not pressured to appeal to mainstream audiences, are even more experimental in their approach to narrative and are therefore even more apt at reaching and representing marginalized communities. See Jacqueline Danziger-Russell, *Girls and their Comics: Finding a Female Voice In Comic Book Narrative* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press 2012), 92.

<sup>211</sup> Fawaz, *New Mutants*, 5.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid.

interlocutor whose arguments around fantasy I borrow to envision the radical imagination of Ganesh's comic art and goddess iconography.

*Tales of Amnesia (2002)*

In 2002 Ganesh made her zine *Tales of Amnesia* during an artist residency in Skowegan near Portland, Maine. Her partner at the time sent her a care package with several issues of comic books that she had read feverishly during her childhood, including *Amar Chitra Katha*, the Indian series about Hindu myth and Indian history. As previously mentioned, these narratives, retold through a nationalist lens, have at their center brave tales about honor and duty, often revolving around heteronormative love stories. Needless to say, the care package was something of an inside joke; but on the other hand, Ganesh's partner knew she would enjoy reading these stories once again as an adult, at least in part. Growing up in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s, there was a dearth of images that did not refer to South Asia as poor and disaster-stricken. *Amar Chitra Katha*, in contrast, offered a counterpoint that served to preserve heritage, a "route to your roots." This phrase, "route to your roots," commonly used to describe the comic book series, resonates in particular with the diaspora not only as a nostalgic link to the "homeland," but as an enactment of diasporic national pride within a hostile and xenophobic host nation – in this case, the United States. In this way, "the diasporic desire



for homeland and the nationalist desire for a mythic past become ideologically intertwined.”<sup>213</sup>

And yet, Ganesh’s partner also knew that she would appreciate the sheer dissonance their queer partnership reflected, in comparison to the heteronormativity embedded in the comics. Although two South Asian women finding love in New York City was not entirely impossible during the late 1990s, it is important to note that they represent the first generation in the United States to come of age after immigration policies relaxed in the post-WWII period, particularly the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 (see chapter one). Thus, the “children of ’65,” as Ganesh’s generation is often characterized, formed for the first time a critical mass in the diaspora, making Ganesh and her partner’s queer diasporic love story *more* possible. In this way, the dissonance between their queer desire in the diaspora and *Amar Chitra Katha*’s desire for nation is significant. Rather than feed her nostalgia, that quintessential diasporic longing for false origins, the care package enabled Ganesh to encounter dissonances within *Amar Chitra Katha* and, in an unprecedented way, make something of them.

For Ganesh, *Amar Chitra Katha* functions as an easily recognizable point of entry, which she reworks and exploits, in an attempt to foreground storylines of sexuality and feminine power. Her alternative zine mobilizes Fawaz’s ideas around how a set of aesthetic and social practices oriented towards invention and fantasy worlds can unfold an ethos of imagining otherwise. This shift is relevant because Ganesh’s manipulation of

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<sup>213</sup> Sailaja Krishnamurti, “Boundaries on Fire: Hybridity and the Political Economy of Culture” (PhD dissertation, York University, 2000), 9–10.

the semiotics and ideologies of comics and myth engenders new narratological (im)possibilities for her protagonists, uniquely available through fantasy.

Using the characteristic style and visual language of *Amar Chitra Katha* to depict the iconography of ancient mythology, *Tales of Amnesia* involves digitally manipulated collages that then incorporate original drawing and text by Ganesh in a way that radically transforms the content. Appropriating “the bright, almost fl[u]orescent color palate and agitated, black outlines and shading of the mostly-70s era ink drawings,”<sup>214</sup> she also makes references to queer and Asian American popular culture such as lesbian pulp fiction and Godzilla. Speaking to this intertextual process, Ganesh remarks:

I take a part of the background, play with it, make brush and ink drawings and then I scan them into a computer. I erase the white space, and I finally add colour, so there is a kind of seamlessness between the characters and the background. There is a lot of hand drawing and manipulation involved.<sup>215</sup>

Saisha Grayson, a curator at the Brooklyn Museum of Art and an art scholar who has published on and curated Ganesh’s work, describes *Tales of Amnesia* in its original comic book format:

Including the title page, Ganesh laid out pages consisting of twenty-one interlocking frames, following comic conventions such that the size of the rectangular blocks shift, altering the composition of each page. This

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<sup>214</sup> Saisha Grayson, “Breathing Between the Lines: Re-Deconstruction in Chitra Ganesh’s *Tales of Amnesia*,” *n.paradoxa: International Journal of Feminist Art* 29 (January 2012), 4–5.

<sup>215</sup> “Profile: Chitra Ganesh,” *The Asian Newspaper*, December 2, 2007, 3.

allows her to emphasize certain images over others, while creating a pleasing rhythmic variation that invites the reader's eye to wander in a way that is not purely literary (left to right), but also telescopic (taking in the overall composition) and impulsive (moving from one detail of interest to another), a trait that comic book creators the world over have exploited through the medium's combination of image and text.<sup>216</sup>

Although *Tales of Amnesia* mimics the low-budget quality of the Hindu comic book series, Ganesh's zine ultimately parodies its unified presentation through its more open-ended and non-teleological visual narratives. Not only does each frame function as a self-contained image, text and image within each frame do not coalesce to convey meaning. In an interview she conducted with me for the magazine *Art & Deal* in 2008, she observes dissonances inherent to *Amar Chitra Katha*:

When I was looking at the original comic strips again [as an adult], I noticed that representations of sexuality were couched in [...] contradictions that I found [...] irritating and insidious. [...] Purity, for example, is centered on specific female characters in various narratives [...]. And [second] [...] all were dressed in a very "I dream of genie" fashion [channeling] [...] exotic South Asian dancer types.<sup>217</sup>

These last three substantive quotes are key to understanding *Tales of Amnesia*'s intertextual interventions and their dissonant effects. Revisiting her childhood

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<sup>216</sup> Grayson, "Breathing Between the Lines," 4.

<sup>217</sup> Chitra Ganesh, "Storytelling: Natasha Bissonauth in Conversation with Chitra Ganesh," *Art & Deal Magazine* 5, no. 4:26 (2008), 99–100.

impressions of *Amar Chitra Katha*, Ganesh constructs a visual iconography based on a symbiotic relationship with the series. However, her digitally manipulated collages engender their own mythographies that intentionally undermine the source material's narrative and iconic logic. Ganesh's manipulations ultimately engender narrative possibilities in a world without men that render the goddess unhinged in her sexuality and femininity. Ganesh's feminine figures are not docile, passive objects from an orientalist dream or nationalist imaginary, but are instead impure, disjointed, and hybrid forms that distort the cohesiveness of these fantasies while defying social expectations around obedience, passivity, and subservience.

*Tales of Amnesia's* cover page is a useful starting point (figure 3.6). It is loosely based on the cover of *Amar Chitra Katha's Tales of Hanuman* (1971); both covers feature a centrally located hybrid creature, suspended between land and sky, poised on the precipice of an epic adventure (figure 3.7). This "call to action" embodies the conventional way heroic journeys begin in myths. Ganesh replaces the broadly built, muscular, adult monkey-god with a slender, adolescent monkey-girl.<sup>218</sup> This replacement is worth dissecting: not only does it disrupt gender binary formations generally associated with monkey-characters in Hindu myth, but it introduces a posthuman opening within goddess iconography. She is not simply an interspecial, human–animal being (so is Hanuman, after all), but is one who exceeds categorization and thus governability. Hanuman is still a devoted disciple to Rama whose main mission is to save Sita from the villainous Rawan in this story. Ganesh's monkey-goddess is not contained in terms of role and narrative plot. In fact, as we shall see, Ganesh's "shero" does not adhere to a

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<sup>218</sup> Grayson, "Breathing Between the Lines," 5.

single face or form either, as our monkey-goddess will disappear after the next set of pages. Thus, as a tale that features multiple modes of the feminine, of sheroism, *Tales of Amnesia* undermines the notion of a singular, unified hero to pursue a fragmented, interspecial, violent, and queer shero. In this way, Ganesh does not only critique myth but engenders her own mythographic iconography that imagines goddess embodiment as a disrupted mode of narration.

Returning to the notion of the monkey-goddess as ungovernable and excessive, I read her therefore as a jungle goddess. The term “jungle,” which refers to a wild, transgressive, untamed being, is a trope with pre-colonial roots that passed through and became reified under British colonialism. Thus, the jungle is an integral part of white *and* brown regulatory imaginations, tied to caste structures that reinforce Brahminical (upper caste) formations as the barometer for what constitutes civilized (and lower caste formations as an inherent deviation). As the protagonist of this upending tale however, Ganesh’s jungle divorces her sullied past and animates this association with more pliability and even desirability. She achieves this by re-imagining the Brahminical *and* orientalist monster into a dissenting and willful feminist subject.<sup>219</sup>

An analysis of the front cover’s accompanying text supports this claim. The cover page features the title of the zine alongside accompanying text that reads: “How to stage the story? Her name was Amnesia, and it fit her like a brand new boxing glove. From a lineage of monkey girls,” Ganesh is careful with her words; naming her protagonist Amnesia is of course intentional and the reference to the boxing glove sets her up for

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<sup>219</sup> See Sara Ahmed, *Willful Subjects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014); J. Halberstam, “The Wild: The Aesthetics of Queer Anarchy,” Lecture, Goldsmiths Department of Art, December 9, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZDP4lcoZ9s4>.

battle. Thus Amnesia, Ganesh's elusive protagonist, is embarking on a (s)heroic journey to combat historical erasure. Or is erasure the goal? I read Amnesia as a "dissenting and willful, feminist subject" because, more than recovering gendered tropes effaced from the official canons of history, literature, and art, Amnesia mobilizes a methodology of forgetfulness, of (un)knowing, "resisting heroic and grand logics of recall."<sup>220</sup> She does so in an attempt to open narrative to "new forms of memory that relate more [...] to lost genealogies, [...] to erasure than to inscription."<sup>221</sup> As a method of (un)knowing, Amnesia also refers to the limits of certain forms of knowing. After all, the national fantasy of *Amar Chitra Katha* is itself a kind of amnesia, and *Tales of Amnesia* calls out this privilege of forgetting to know otherwise. And finally, to return to the first line in the cover page text – "How to stage the story?" – as Ganesh's protagonist is empowered to re-forget history, she does so by "immediately foreground[ing] issues of staging, framing, and construction,"<sup>222</sup> thereby undercutting the authority and confines of teleological storytelling that plague historical inquiry.

In figure 3.6, the final thought is unfinished (given the comma at the end), and it is unclear if the next frame on the following page adheres to the conventions of comics and linear narrative to follow suit. The monkey jungle goddess recurs in figure 3.8, this time treading through shallow bright blue water while the end of her tail is engulfed in flames. These flames echo the blazing skyline in the background whose debris spills onto the shore. This scene recalls the mythological story of how Hanuman, the servant monkey god, who, in an attempt to save his master's wife, the kidnapped Sita, burns the

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<sup>220</sup> J. Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press 2011), 15.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

<sup>222</sup> Grayson, "Breathing Between the Lines," 6.

island of Lanka with his flaming tail. In Ganesh's redo, the imagery is similar enough to recall this familiar story; however, her text animates the story anew. The text reads: "She was prompted by anxiety to chew off her own tail at an early age," thereby overlaying the familiar mythological story with adolescent anxieties of burning away or severing from restraints, restraints fortified by a character like Sita. Traditionally, Sita models a form of femininity that values wifely servitude, as exemplified by her unquestioned loyalty to her husband, Lord Rama. Finding empowerment in girlhood, as opposed to in relation to men in power, recurs as an organizing principle throughout *Tales of Amnesia*.

This first frame immediately after Ganesh's cover page introduces conjunctions between ideas that Ganesh will repeat in an attempt to reconfigure their relation to one another, notably representations of the feminine form with violent imagery. Indeed, throughout *Tales of Amnesia* there are repeated images of jungle femininity as combined with images of violence, mobilizing meaning in dissonant juxtapositions. In the following remarks, Ganesh critiques how the juxtaposition manifests in *Amar Chitra Katha*: "I'm fascinated by how traditional myth and folklore celebrate sex and violence, but only to instill notions of appropriate behavior and gender expression by punishing those who attempt to transgress societal norms."<sup>223</sup> Narratives in the comic book series present sati – widows volunteering self-immolation upon their husband's burning pyres – as an honorable option; *Amar Chitra Katha* often generates an engrossing tale that celebrates physical violence at the expense of female agency.<sup>224</sup> Likewise, in Greek myths, gender-based violence such as rape is commonplace and is narrated as a lesson in chance (there

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<sup>223</sup> Chitra Ganesh, artist statement, 2006. Excerpt available at: <http://sites.asiasociety.org/arts/onewayoranother/oneway2.html>  
Arshiya Lokhandwala, "Chahe Koi Mujhe Jungle Kahe," *ArtIndia* 12, no. 4 (2007), 108.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid.

is no justice for Leda, who is raped by Zeus in the form of a swan; instead, the beautiful Helen of Troy is born). A prime example of how Ganesh subverts this gendered violence is shown in figure 3.10, a panel based on the story of Parvati<sup>225</sup> – yet another tale of wifely loyalty – and depicts her youth. In *Amar Chitra Katha*’s version, Parvati is portrayed playing a game of catch, but her speech bubble betrays her desire to “play with dolls” (figure 3.9). The series sources specific historical texts, such as Kalidasa’s *Kumara Sambhava*<sup>226</sup> for its representation of Parvati, versions of the goddess that, not coincidentally, align with nationalist ideologies for femininity. Yet other historical texts emphasize the ferociousness of the goddess, namely those from Puranic texts like the *Devi Mahatmya*, which embraces a plethora of influences including local, regional, or non-Aryan sources (which might arguably be considered jungle, from a Brahminical perspective), alongside Aryan traditions. However the storytellers behind *Amar Chitra Katha* avoid these sources, preferring the sanitized versions of the goddess. Ganesh’s digital manipulations are minimal – amounting to but a few drops of blood on her pursed lips – yet, as Grayson notes, they boldly suture Parvati to her fiercer incarnations such as Durga or even Kali, or at least to tantric practices (associated with Kali) that involve blood rites.<sup>227</sup> An otherwise docile and naïve character imbued with a cannibalistic appetite, Ganesh’s Parvati is no longer interested in playing with dolls, and prefers to play catch with a bloody severed limb.

With regard to the accompanying text, which reads, “Godzilla, you didn’t stand a chance,” Ganesh’s bloodthirsty Parvati is eager to challenge a fearsome monster.

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<sup>225</sup> *Amar Chitra Katha’s Shiva Parvati: The Story of Divine Love* (1972).

<sup>226</sup> From the fifth century.

<sup>227</sup> Grayson, “Breathing Between the Lines,” 15.



Anachronistic in mention, Godzilla also has metaphorical resonance for Asia and Asian America as a monstrous, bullish character that perpetuates xenophobic myths such as the clash of civilizations and the yellow peril. However, *Tales of Amnesia*'s re-imagination of goddess iconography pokes fun at this mythic fear, thereby defusing its power to vilify the other.

Alongside the dissonant proximity of femininity and violence, *Tales of Amnesia* also calls out the celebration of sex and violence in *Amar Chitra Katha* by mobilizing meaning in dissonant juxtapositions. For example, in the right frame of figure 3.11, Ganesh depicts two scantily clad women with prominent busts; and they evoke an eerie enchantment with the practice of burning bodies. They rummage through a mound of rotting bodies and tortured faces, toward which countless scavenger birds flock. These details of human debris derive directly (intertextually) from the pages of *Amar Chitra Katha*'s *Ashoka: The Warrior Who Spoke of Peace* (1973), a story about the Buddhist emperor and philanthropist from the second century BCE whose narratives of conquest have been romanticized and absorbed into a longer narrative around Indian nationalism (figure 3.12).<sup>228</sup> In *Ashoka*, the warrior king and his men bear witness to a horrific scene of human war casualties – “100,000 to be precise,” as the text states. In Ganesh's version, she removes the men from the scene, replacing them with her female torsos who say to one another, “the fire, the fire” and “gets more gorgeous every time.” Despite their wide-open eyes, they seem blind to the horrors that surround them.<sup>229</sup> Hence Ganesh's appropriative move enacts a disconnect between the figures, their setting, and their

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<sup>228</sup> The emblem of the Republic of India is an adaption of the Lion Capital of Ashoka, or what is referred to as asokmudra.

<sup>229</sup> Grayson, “Breathing Between the Lines,” 18–19.

reaction, a move that contradicts the conventions of graphic narrative, which choose to harmonize such elements. Further, while Ganesh maintains *Amar Chitra Katha*'s color scheme for most of the image, she renders the pile of bodies more greenish-blue in hue, evoking the process of decay rather than simply representing death. This formal decision animates the horror of the scene and thus further distinguishes itself from the mesmerized tone of Ganesh's text.

In addition, consider the following image's disturbing imbrication of sati and lesbian desire (figure 3.13). First, the narrative text-box at the top, which reads, "It was tea time, the fall air was cold--" does not find a visual parallel in the image, which is devoid of teatime or autumnal references. Instead the viewer is met with an erotically charged scene shared between women – the exposed breasts, fondling, and a locked gaze. But in the artist's words, "since their breasts were practically hanging out anyhow [in *Amar Chitra Katha*], I wanted to see what it would be like if it actually looked like what it was implying and playing with that."<sup>230</sup> And yet, the text in figure 3.13, which reads, "When they cremated you, did your teeth dissolve in the fire?" is set in direct contrast to the accompanying scene. As one of many images in *Tales of Amnesia* that mobilize queer female desire, this image–text relationality de-naturalizes the hetero-patriarchal overtones – often violent – of *Amar Chitra Katha*'s religious and nationalist agendas, especially regarding the role of women and/or wives. The proximity of lesbian desire and gender-based violence here embodies the zine's most obvious and most provoking interventions. So close, we could say they themselves erotically touch. In this way, the goddess

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<sup>230</sup> Ganesh, Interview with Natasha Bissonauth, 100.

embodies Elizabeth Freeman's method of erotohistoriography, bringing in pleasure to reanimate the processes of historical consciousness.<sup>231</sup>

Ganesh further affronts *Amar Chitra Katha* by inflecting her appropriations with imagery and tropes from lesbian pulp fiction. From the late 1940s to the late 1960s, during the conservatism of the Eisenhower years and McCarthy era – before the impending sexual revolution – lesbian pulp fiction cover art was memorably scandalous. This subgenre of cheaply produced reading material became iconic in its kitschy defiance of the prudish era of its production. *Strange Sisters*, a publication of approximately 200 lesbian pulp fiction covers, captures the subgenre's crossing of bad romance and soft porn: the lewd images typically portray two women as heightened sexual creatures, be they coy, anxious, or downright predatory.<sup>232</sup> And, not unlike figure 3.13, they are often provocative in the way they dress, touch, and gaze at each other.

Arguably, Ganesh manipulates frames in *Amar Chitra Katha* to enact her own set of “strange sisters,” perverting the story of Mirabai, a sixteenth-century mystic poet and Bhakti saint, who devotes her life to Lord Krishna and divine song (figures 3.14 and 3.15).<sup>233</sup> I should note that Mirabai is not a mythological character but a historical one; her spiritual devotion has been so mythologized, however, as a figure she has come to conjure the godly. In *Amar Chitra Katha*'s frame, she is five years old and her mother

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<sup>231</sup> Elizabeth Freeman, “Time Binds, or, Erotohistoriography,” in *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 95–136.

<sup>232</sup> Needless to say, these narratives rarely ended happily since their main audience was largely heterosexual men who responded to depictions of women as heightened sexual creatures – be they shame-ridden, coy, alluring, or predatory. However, among their lesbian readership – which was small and isolated from one another at the time – these books, as melodramatic as they were, provided a sense of community and vicarious pleasure; see Jaye Zimet, *Strange Sisters: The Art of Lesbian Pulp Fiction, 1949–1969* (New York, Viking Studio, 1999).

<sup>233</sup> *Amar Chitra Katha's Mirabai*, 1972.

suggests that she pray to Krishna with a devotion akin to the bonds of marriage – a suggestion that Mirabai proceeds to interpret literally. The scene in *Amar Chitra Katha* takes place against a pale blue wall with a geometrically patterned window in the background. Devotional lamps and incense in the foreground serve as offerings to Krishna who is pictured to the left, iconically playing his flute. Ganesh's version leaves the background details of the scene in place but manipulates the characters, either through strategies of doubling and disappearance. Instead of the mother guiding Mirabai to her beloved Krishna, Ganesh doubles the young girl and places the doppelgänger as a reflected image in close proximity to her. As a result, the two identical figures appear as twin girls locked in an incestuously queer kiss. Additionally, Ganesh erases Krishna from the frame and chooses to animate his absence by taking the single peacock eye feather from his headdress and placing it, repeated, where his physical presence used to be. In line with the text-box that states, "What strange creature is making its presence known?" Ganesh reanimates the god's material form as a "strange [...] presence." Her version manipulates the speech bubble to speak from the perspective of the twin girls, rather than the mother, and the turns of phrase are illuminating: "Mother always told me: never waste your words. Always remember your better half..." The phrase, "waste your words" recalls and potentially insults the original Mirabai and her life dedication to devotional poetry; whereas the phrase "other half," which usually connotes a significant other, is here visualized by the doppelgängers, referring instead to sisterhood, multiple aspects of oneself, and/or desire for oneself. I should note here that the tone of Mirabai's song poetry is so beloved that it is sensuous in its devotion to Krishna. So there is a known eroticism attached to her spirituality, and indeed to the Bhakti tradition in which she

figures prominently. Ganesh transforms a scene about sensuous religious devotion into a message of self-reliance and self-love for young girls, a message that is categorically amiss in *Amar Chitra Katha*. She does so by reorienting the erotics towards the self, provocatively enacted by a scene of incestuous desire between girls.

Interspecial, bloodthirsty, queer, and incestuous, Ganesh's jungle goddess foregrounds the excessive uncontainability, the spillage that is feminine form. Her attention to the structure of mythological storytelling debunks its conventions by using a number of specific strategies *within* this genre of comics. *Tales of Amnesia* imagines otherwise, by encrypting the conventions of comics, rendering what is conventionally accessible about comics illegible and obscured. While the familiarity of comics draws her audience in, she ultimately leaves her audience in the midst of an unfamiliar encounter, an experience akin to the uncanny. The viewer is, as a result, undone; and yet because of the audacious and graphic imagery and juxtapositions, Ganesh's undoing is couched in a sense of play. Trained in art semiotics, Ganesh is invested in taking different codes and placing them in conversation with one another, anew. Her intertextual cut-and-paste animates the most basic and fundamental tenet of the politics of form: visual literacy. However she includes a critical addendum: do not believe everything you see; or perhaps, learn to read what you see. As such she incites not only the need to read images, but the political import of reading through images.

While here I conduct a close reading of the artist's aesthetic labor, Ganesh's images have been mostly received as a "brown" translation of Roy Lichtenstein.<sup>234</sup> For

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<sup>234</sup> In *ArtNews*, she notes how art criticism from the western imaginary is too quick to frame her work in terms of its Indianness rather than speak to the plethora of themes and sources it addresses, never mind its

example, in 2011 when *Tales of Amnesia* showed at the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh as part of a solo show entitled *The Word of God(ess)*,<sup>235</sup> it was for the most part well received. The curator Eric Shiner included vitrines that displayed original *Amar Chitra Katha* comics to make explicit their relation. And while Ganesh's work is critical of Hindu dogmatism, Pittsburgh's diasporic South Asian community regarded the show as a playful and racy take on familiar material from their childhood.<sup>236</sup> Overall, it was considered a welcome interrogation of accepted narratives. Other art critics compared her work to that of Louise Bourgeois, Frida Kahlo, and Kiki Smith, firmly situating her within a fierce feminist tradition of art-making.<sup>237</sup> Yet, consider the tone of this review: "[i]magine this work blown up to wall size. And imagine just before it the same image with a blond Caucasian woman, done in Roy Lichtenstein's Ben-Day dot style. Looking past the exotic surface, one finds commonality."<sup>238</sup> Such reductive statements convey the challenge reviewers have with seeing past the "exotic" brown. In this way, this commentary says more about the critic's myopic lens than of the work of art.

In 2006 *Tales of Amnesia* exhibited in a three-person show that brought together artists from South Asia and its diaspora at the Thomas Erben Gallery in New York (her representative gallery at the time). Thereafter, Ganesh has repeatedly found herself curated at this intersection, which has at times been limiting. The inclusion and

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formal play. "Chitra Ganesh Responds," *ARTnews*, May 26, 2015, <http://www.artnews.com/2015/05/26/chitra-ganesh-responds/>

<sup>235</sup> Ganesh's solo show was part of a series of exhibitions at the Warhol Museum examining the intersection of religion and mass culture.

<sup>236</sup> Eric Shiner, personal interview, February 26, 2015.

<sup>237</sup> Mary Thomas, "Comic-Book Style Brings Home 'Word of God(ess)' Exhibition to the Warhol," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, August 17, 2011,

<http://www.post-gazette.com/ae/art-architecture/2011/08/17/Comic-book-style-brings-home-Word-of-God-ess-exhibition-to-the-Warhol/stories/201108170228>.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid.

intersection is of course not inherently problematic, but without accounting for the different histories and conditions of production, these curatorial decisions betray their market-driven motives and flatten “difference.” For example, Ganesh eventually made framed prints of various scenes from the zine, some of which hung in the 2010 show *The Empire Strikes Back: Indian Art Today* at the Saatchi Gallery – a show that was supposed to showcase contemporary Indian art but also included artists from the diaspora (as well as work from Pakistan). And, while the show featured a number of contemporary Indian art superstars such as Subodh Gupta, Atul Dodiya, and Pushpamala N, it was critiqued for lacking substance, showing work that exploited postcolonial otherness as mere gimmick. In fact, *Tales of Amnesia* was one of the few works that was lauded; its female leads were celebrated as “[sexually] liberated Indian superwom[e]n.”<sup>239</sup> Nevertheless, given the show’s geographic framing, the show did nothing about analyzing Ganesh’s formal interventions.<sup>240</sup> Interestingly, in India the reception around *Tales of Amnesia* has taken on a different tone altogether. Ganesh’s first solo show in India was in 2009 at Chatterjee and Lal, where her South Asian audience was less intrigued by the content – since it was not foreign to them – and so the reception of her work immediately delved into the semiotics of comics and myth rather than her identitarian context.

*Tales of Amnesia* marked an important moment in Ganesh’s career, namely her rise and entrée into the contemporary global art world as a significant contributor amid

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<sup>239</sup> Adrian Searle, “The Empire Strikes Back: Indian Art Today,” *The Guardian*, February 2, 2010, <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2010/feb/02/the-empire-strikes-back-indian-art-today-review>.

<sup>240</sup> Ganesh has made prints (produced by the Brodsky Center for Innovative Editions) out of the zine’s various frames and these have exhibited on a wider scale than the zine. They have even sold in auction. In June 2013, Christie’s NY sold a set of the twenty-one prints for approximately \$42,000. The individual prints generally sell for under \$5,000; however, in 2008, Saffronart, an online auction house based in Mumbai, sold a single print (captioned, “Dear X, My Heart”) for just under \$21,000.

the increasing prominence of artists from South Asia, India in particular, and the South Asian diaspora. The zine's first major exhibition occurred in 2004 at the Brooklyn Museum of Art's *Open House: Working in Brooklyn*, upon which the Museum acquired an edition for their permanent collection. The last time *Tales of Amnesia* exhibited was also at the Brooklyn Museum, in conjunction with her temporary mural and installation, *Eyes of Time* (2014). I relate *Tales of Amnesia* and *Eyes of Time* as two works of art that both engender aberrations of goddess iconography. Ganesh's zine unearths a jungle goddess, while *Eyes of Time* offers a more future-oriented re-imagining in the form of a cybergoddess. According to Rosi Braidotti and Nina Lykke, both the goddess and cyborg are boundary figures that undermine the great modern divide between the human and non-human – what Bruno Latour argues distinguishes modern subjects from their primitive counterparts.<sup>241</sup> Not only does this false dichotomy create hierarchies between humans and non-humans, but this logic has historically disciplined humanity into categories that hierarchize human difference – full humans, not-quite-humans, and non-humans.<sup>242</sup> As boundary figures, though, *both* the goddess and the cyborg challenge the modern scientific worldview that has for centuries cast the non-human in the role of an exploitable object for the human; and both the goddess and the cyborg recast the non-human as a subject and agent in her own right. Although myth does not necessitate a discursive manifestation of institutional authority, images of Bharat Mata and *Amar Chitra Katha* demonstrate how ideologies undergirding institutionalized myth serve to contain the ostensibly uncontainable. I claim that Ganesh's jungle goddess and

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<sup>241</sup> Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

<sup>242</sup> Alexander Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 3.



cybergoddess in *Tales of Amnesia* and *Eyes of Time* (figure 3.16) participate in a more inventive form of mythography, unhinged from these institutionalized versions of the goddess. I connect Ganesh's jungle goddesses and cybergoddesses as hybrid boundary figures that not only disavow the human/non-human divide, but, in their shared monstrous sisterhood, counter dominant ideologies that place boundaries around the boundary figure of the goddess as well.

With *Eyes of Time*, Ganesh's cybergoddess also disrupts goddess iconography, this time through the fantastical language of science fiction. As an image, *Eyes of Time* plays with the conventions of goddess iconography, but as a site-specific mural in conversation with a vitrine of art objects from the museum's permanent collection, *Eyes of Time* plays with the conventions of museal display. In this way, Ganesh's cybergoddess symbolizes the future disruption of museal narrative.

### *Eyes of Time* (2014)

In many ways, *Eyes of Time* represents a point of arrival of sorts for Ganesh. Publications like *Art Asia Pacific*, *Art Forum*, and *Hyperallergic* reviewed the show as an innovative and timely intersection of myth, comics, and science fiction's modes of visual storytelling. Indeed, when she made *Eyes of Time*, Ganesh's position in the art world had been firmly established.<sup>243</sup> Located in the Herstory Gallery of the Elizabeth A. Sackler

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<sup>243</sup> This critical reception follows a string of successful moments in her career. After receiving her MFA from Columbia University (2002), she made her commercial debut, gaining representation with the Thomas Erben Gallery in New York City. She eventually sought representation with the Wendi Norris Gallery in San Francisco, which has organized three solo shows of her work since 2012. She has received a number of acknowledgements such as The Art Matters Foundation Grant (2010). In 2012 she received the Simon

Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum from December 2014 to July 2015, *Eyes of Time* is composed of a mural and vitrine of artworks from the museum's permanent collection, specifically selected by Ganesh for their goddess imagery. Typically, projects in this gallery converse with *The Dinner Party* (1979), a permanent installation and iconic second-wave feminist artwork by Judy Chicago in an adjacent gallery. I argue that *Eyes of Time* converses with Chicago, but also with the Brooklyn's permanent collection in the form of institutional critique around museal display. Chicago's iconic feminist artwork comprises a rectangular table that extends three lengths to form the perimeter of a triangle with thirty-nine porcelain plate settings stylized as vaginas. On top of large triangular-shaped table, several porcelain place settings symbolically reclaim historical and mythological female figures such as Ishtar, Artemisia Gentileschi, Virginia Woolf, and many others. An aesthetic display in the form of a hypothetically shared meal (across time and space), Chicago creates a symbol of nourishment and hospitality. As such, *The Dinner Party* enacts an invitation for dialogic

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Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship in the Creative Arts, which led to prolonged research and projects in iconography and myth. Ganesh has held several residencies including at the Queens Museum, Asia Society, Berkeley Art Museum, Museum of Contemporary Art of San Diego, and the Contemporary Art Museum in Houston. In 2013–2014, at New York University's Asian /Pacific/American Institute, she played a leading role in their conference, *Radical Archives* (April 2014). She has had several solo shows in India, Europe, Asia and the United States, and has exhibited in many major group shows including the highly acclaimed exhibition about afrofuturism, *Radical Presence* (2013), at the Studio Harlem Museum. In 2014, Durham Press commissioned her to produce *Architects of the Future*, a print series that has consequently increased her presence within the art fair circuit. She has been invited to speak about her work at events across the globe, from a range of university symposia, to the New York Art Book Fair, to San Art in Saigon, Vietnam. Her work has been avidly collected by museums and collections – the Museum of Modern Art, Philadelphia Museum of Art, San Jose Museum of Art, the Burger Collection, Devi Art Foundation, Baltimore Museum of Art, Brooklyn Museum of Art, and the Saatchi Collection. Finally, her art has been featured as the cover for several publications: Jasbir Puar's *Terrorist Assemblages* (2007), which introduced the notion of homonationalism or the complicity of LGBT rights' discourse with the colonial project of empire; anthropologist Svati Shah's book examining the informal economies of sex work in Mumbai, *Street Corner Secrets* (2014); and Bushra Rehman's fiction novel, *Corona* (2013), which chronicles working-class immigrant encounters in Queens, NY.

relationships, conversation, and conviviality – thereby broadening the impact of feminist strategies beyond the confines and specifics of “women’s issues.”

Ganesh takes Chicago’s plating dedicated to Kali, the Hindu goddess of time, destruction, and renewal, as a point of departure. Yet *Eyes of Time* departs from Chicago’s aesthetic decisions and political framework.<sup>244</sup> *The Dinner Party* aimed to reclaim the past in order to build another kind of future; however, the artwork has been criticized for depicting temporal progression in a sequential way, for relegating most non-white characters to pre-history, and for understanding mythological time as pre-historical. Distinct from anthropological accounts of the religious deity, Ganesh’s version of Kali hones in on the abstracted, philosophical idea of Kali as an embodiment of cyclic time. She develops a future-oriented, science fictional vision for the goddess, through cyborgian embodiment. Like myth, science fiction is a powerful metaphor for the human condition, asking what makes humans distinctly human (and not spirit, or demon, or animal, or robot, for example) while also accounting for what it means to be embodied in the high-tech world of the present and potential future. Further, science fiction mythologizes the role of technology at a visionary level.<sup>245</sup> For example, as a fantastical device, science fiction paradoxically serves as “an effective deconstructive instrument for unmasking the sociopolitical desires and fears in the ‘real’ world that motivated the creation of the alternate world in the first place.”<sup>246</sup>

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<sup>244</sup> While Ganesh would certainly describe her own practice as feminist, the feminist work of Chicago’s generation has been critiqued for its white, Eurocentric lens on knowledge production.

<sup>245</sup> Thomas C. Sutton and Marilyn Sutton, “Science Fiction As Mythology,” *Western Folklore* 28, no. 4 (1969): 230–237.

<sup>246</sup> Betsy Huang, *Contesting Genres in Contemporary Asian American Fiction* (New York: Palgrave, 2010), 100.

The mural portion of *Eyes of Time* features three cyborgian figures. As visitors enter the Herstory Gallery, they encounter a large, sixty-foot long mural that combines painting, drawing, and sculptural objects. Because the gallery space is narrow and thus intimate, past artists' projects have been significantly smaller in scale. By contrast, *Eyes of Time* is one of the most ambitious uses of the Herstory Gallery. Ganesh's mural uses the entire length of the wall, the largest flat surface she has worked on to date.<sup>247</sup> As a result, the three cyborgian figures tower over the intimate space. She treats the surface with a peachy base coat, then paints a bright fuchsia pink to offer contrast. Typical of her work, the background is non-specific, and yet the darker hues at the bottom serve to ground her figures, which are otherwise floating in indeterminate space. Although this painterly effect distinguishes *Eyes of Time* from *Tales of Amnesia*'s flat comic book graphics, the indeterminacy of place in her mural connects to fantasy.

The viewer first encounters a depiction of a woman, which Grayson describes as an artist self-portrait (figure 3.17); the artist's presence is thus implied.<sup>248</sup> With Ganesh's graphic style of drawing – featuring her solid, economical line – the details are sparse and characteristics are obscured in this blue outline. The face of the self-portrait is further obscured by a galactic black hole hiding her right eye – through which she gazes. Given its thick and scintillating texture, the black hole stands out from the simple, flat blue outline, and as such destabilizes the impermeability of the wall. The most evocative aspects of the rest of the portrait also stand out in their materiality. First, Ganesh creates the figure's right shoulder and arm out of several long and narrow shards of mirrors.

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<sup>247</sup> Although Ganesh has worked on walls that have been longer in length, they were not flat like this one but had a curved surface.

<sup>248</sup> Saisha Grayson, personal interview, February 12, 2015.

These pieces of broken glass form a jagged pattern that find a reflection in the drawn-in designs on the other half of the body. Between the galactic hole and the shards of glass, Ganesh's wall drawing conjures a being that is at once human, machine, and celestial. Furthermore, the work expands on acts of looking; by virtue of the galactic black hole and the reflective surfaces of the mirrors, the act of looking out, looking in, and looking through grounds this cyborgian figure firmly in the present. That is to say, by mobilizing a self-portrait in conjunction with an inward- and outward-gazing black hole, alongside reflective surfaces of the mirrors, this image creates a back and forth between the artist and viewer – who in gazing back will also have their gaze returned to them (by way of the mirrors) – in the here and now.

On the opposite side of the body on the forearm, Grayson observes a “cyborgian wound”<sup>249</sup> with complex and layered materiality. Ganesh applies reddish-brown paint on a piece of plastic with dried glue, creating a bumpy and uneven foundation. She includes rubber tire shavings over the paint to make it grittier and fuzzier, creating an effect that resembles a burn mark or an open wound that will not heal. For more three-dimensional texture, Ganesh adds pins and adheres black pieces of tape to the plastic's perimeter. Finally, a thick pink wire weaves through the cyborgian wound (which consequently connects to the mural's central and main figure). This collage of materials evokes a wound that is simultaneously fleshy and robotic.

While mechanistic details manifest in all three of the figures in the mural, they are maximized in the last figure, positioned at the opposite end of the wall. This time, Ganesh

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<sup>249</sup> Ibid.

draws the figure's face in profile and uses a simple metallic purple outline (figure 3.18). The details of her painted hairline and hair strands bleed into more technological forms that Ganesh encrusts with glittery gems. This painted profile features two speakers alongside at least ten overlaid gears. As they hover over the painted outline on the wall, they contribute to the portrait's three-dimensional materiality. Custom-made, the metal gears resemble the internal structure of a clock or watch. Ganesh renders the figure's mind – or sense of consciousness – like a deconstructed apparatus meant to measure time. The mechanistic elements seem imbricated in the very fabric of the figure's sense of self – a self that is no longer solely wedded to human subjectivity, but to more mechanistic forms of aliveness as well. This matrix of technological devices combined with the human face evokes a science fictional being or a cyborgian animatedness with an undefined orientation towards the future.

Between Ganesh's self-reflective bust that evokes presence and/or presentness and this future-oriented profile, she places the mural's central and main attraction (figure 3.19). Of the three cyborgian figures, this central character most resembles representations of Kali familiar to worshippers throughout Asia and its diaspora. Her skirt of severed arms, bright blue skin, multiple arms bearing weapons, and her long, unkempt hair are, after all, paradigmatic features; however, Ganesh alters other elements. For example, she transforms the goddess' weapons by adding eyeballs to them, thereby converting them into tools of perception. In addition to the arms, she also multiplies the goddess' legs and breasts. This attention to mutation emphasizes the goddess as an aberration (though curiously, the additional breasts specifically connect *Eyes of Time* to a

lexicon of mythic representations of goddesses with multiple breasts).<sup>250</sup> Flesh in *Eyes of Time* is mostly mutated into technologically fantastic forms, thereby transforming the anthropomorphic goddess into a human/non-human/machine: that is, into a cybergoddess. In addition to the various examples of her technologized embodiment already described and discussed – the cyborgian wound that is both fleshy and robotic, her bust of mirrors, the speakers and gears around her head – the central figure’s arm comes into play. Ganesh replaces the solid flesh with a dematerialized, robotic texture. Her three nipples also scintillate in their bejeweled texture. In her most dramatic manipulation, Ganesh replaces Kali’s iconic face with the iconic golden clock from Grand Central Station in New York City. Thus, be it via a re-conception of time, via technologized form, or via iconicity, Ganesh rereads cultural and religious formations through fantastic form.

This gesture resonates with the main tenets of ethnofuturism.<sup>251</sup> If tropes like the “alien encounter” and a “far-away planet” read as twin signifiers in science fiction, they

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<sup>250</sup> In an interview, Ganesh remarks that the mutation and multiplication of Kali’s breasts is connected to the proto-feminist figure Nangeli and her protest against Brahmanic patriarchal oppression (Artist and Curator Talk, “Eyes of Time,” Brooklyn Museum of Art, March 26, 2015). Nangeli was a dalit woman who lived in the early nineteenth century at Cherthala in the princely state of Travancore, India. She questioned the breast tax system where women of lower caste were required to pay taxes to cover their bosom in public. She refused to uncover her bosom *and* to pay the tax. Legend says that when the village officer of Travancore insisted that she pay the tax she chopped off her breasts and presented them in a plantain leaf to him. She died that same day due to extreme blood loss. This incident incited a lot of anger in the community and by 1812, nine years after her death, the breast tax system was annulled in Travancore. The place she lived came to be known later as Mulachiparambu (or land of the breasted women); however today her memory is only preserved by researchers and few elders, as there are no memorials or books that mark her story. Moreover, the name, Mulachiparambu, has since been covered up, mostly likely due to embarrassment.

<sup>251</sup> Ironically, if science fiction originated as a marginal form of culture production, its imperialist preoccupations “fantasizing” global conquest are well documented. As John Rieder notes, the colonial gaze frames science fiction in that the period witnessing the most fervid imperialist expansion in the late nineteenth century coincides exactly with the rise of the genre. Since the early pulp days of the genre, science fiction has romanticized and demonized the imaginary Orient, rather than take the opportunity to dissect how its narratives of otherness, otherworldiness, and alienation might reflect systemic social realities tied to the histories of empire. Within the context of American immigration history, orientalist tropes such as the “yellow peril” illuminate an “enduring ambivalence towards [foreigners] as friend or foe in its conception of the future” (Huang, *Contesting Genres*, 97). Within an Asian American context more

do so for histories of colonialism and the immigrant experience as well. Ethnofuturism re-imagines the diaspora as a fantastical category that treats alienation, nostalgia, and belonging as metaphorical tropes. And yet, rather than treat science fiction as an allegory for otherness, difference, or identity politics, Ganesh's cybergoddess intervenes and pushes the conventions of ethnofuturism even further. Just as Amnesia embodies a new form of narrative by virtue of forgetting in *Tales of Amnesia*, Ganesh's cybergoddess, as a science fictional re-imagining of Kali as cyclic time, embodies non-teleological narrative itself. Thus, Ganesh's jungle and cybergoddess dare to imagine otherwise not only in their re-imaginings of goddess iconography but also in the way they embody new narrative forms.

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specifically, "description[s] of [immigrant] laborers [...] and science fiction strangely converge" (ibid., 96). The Chinese Exclusion Act (1882) was rationalized based on descriptions of Asians that questioned their humanity: as "inhabitants of another planet", and as "machine-like" and "unemotional" laborers (Iris Chang, *The Chinese in America* [New York: Penguin, 2003], 130). This type of policy language, which enacted a sense of uncivilized subjectivity, has also influenced orientalist portrayals in popular culture, especially villainous characters; consider Ming the Merciless from *Flash Gordon* or Khan of the *Star Trek* universe.

And yet, despite such historical complicity, science fiction does not have to replicate imperialist ideological structures. Since the 1970s and 1980s authors like Samuel R. Delany and Octavia Butler have de-centered the colonial gaze inherent to science fiction's origins. Subgenres such as afrofuturism or ethnofuturism not only disarm science fiction of its imperialist roots, but they have the capacity to re-genre science fiction by mobilizing its uniquely fabulatory models to imagine otherwise as a matter of social critique and political analysis. Furthermore, ethnofuturist cultural production draws on concepts derived from afrofuturism, while complicating the black and white divide that dominates race discourse in the US. Drawing on Darko Suvin, who understands science fiction as "cognitive estrangement" (Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979]), ethnofuturism re-imagines the diaspora as a fantastical category that illuminates the tropes of alienation and otherworldliness so resonant within science fiction. A conventional gesture in the burgeoning field of Asian American science fiction treats alienation, nostalgia, and belonging as metaphorical tropes. For more on afrofuturism and ethnofuturism, see Eric D. Smith, *Globalization, Utopia, and Postcolonial Science Fiction: New Maps of Hope* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); John Rieder, *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2008); Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr., "Science Fiction and Empire," *Science Fiction Studies* 30, no. 2 (July, 2003): 231–45; W.D. De Kilgore, *Astrofuturism: Science, Race, and Visions of Utopia in Space* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003). Mark Dery coined the word "afrofuturism" in "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delaney, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 92, no. 4 (1993).



In this final section, I turn to the white vitrine of artworks from the Brooklyn Museum's permanent collection, which accompanies the mural. I suggest that Ganesh's cybergoddess converses with the collection by offering a strong metaphor for countering the conventions of museal display, especially narrations of the visual culture of difference and women of color formations (figure 3.20). Museal display of non-western art historically adheres to a Hegelian notion of time that translates the spatial distribution of the continents (Asia, Africa, America, and Europe) into chronological order – where the western imaginary represents itself as the innovative and enlightened present and the East as the traditional and barbaric past.<sup>252</sup> In addition to colonial understandings of time, nationalist genealogies also inform art display. Thus, the opportunity to draw connections across cultural and temporal schemas within permanent collections is often amiss; Ganesh's vitrine sheds light on these narrative and epistemological shortcomings.

In a curatorial debut of sorts, Ganesh exhibits her zine *Tales of Amnesia* alongside other works from the contemporary and South Asian collections. She also includes text where she expounds on her logic around visual storytelling as museal intervention. Thus, in contrast to *Tales of Amnesia*, she makes available the intricate layers of narrative form. While some chosen objects relate more directly to Kali, others illuminate the broader strokes of her project. For example, Ganesh exhibits two small bronze sculptures – a standing Kali from seventeenth-century Kerala, India alongside an Egyptian statue of a seated Sekhmet (664–332 BCE). These pieces signal the revered history of goddess iconography in pre-monotheistic cultures. Kali's four hands hold a scythe, trident, skull

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<sup>252</sup> Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 151.

cup, and mace, objects that “allude to her famous battle against the demon Raktabija, a metaphor for the human ego.”<sup>253</sup> And, like Kali, mythic descriptions of Sekhmet connote feminine forms of power. Both Sekhmet and Kali are associated with fire, healing, and menstruation. They are, as such, twin figures in their connections to blood, death, destruction, and protection. They are also often depicted with ferocious animals like tigers and lions. By exhibiting these goddesses alongside the mural, Ganesh connects multiple histories of images that highlight fierceness stemming from a feminine source.

As Ganesh explains in her wall text, the decision to exhibit *The Goddess Matangi*, an eighteenth-century Rajasthani watercolor anonymously gifted to the museum, references multiple forms of the goddess. The many-armed Durga is depicted riding her tiger while her even fiercer (but lesser known) incarnation, Matangi, is shown in the upper left corner holding a severed head and sword. Alongside Kali, Durga as well as Matangi represent some of the most fearsome forms of female divinity. The multiple presences of the goddess in this painting point to the plurality of her many forms and their fluid interrelations. And yet some of these preferred avatars have a specific following worth noting. As a marginal figure in the pantheon, Matangi “has often been associated with worship among lower castes.”<sup>254</sup> Thus, by choosing an image of Matangi to highlight the goddess’ multiplicity, Ganesh launches a conversation about the goddess’s relationship to different kinds of social and religious groups.

Next to *Tales of Amnesia* is Kiki Smith’s 1991 lithograph *Untitled* (from the set *Banshee Pearls*). Ganesh’s practice relates to Smith’s engagement with bodily matter and

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<sup>253</sup> Chitra Ganesh, artwork label for *Standing Kali*, seventeenth century. *Eyes of Time* installation, Brooklyn Museum, 2015.

<sup>254</sup> Chitra Ganesh, artwork label for *The Goddess Matangi*, 1760. *Eyes of Time* installation, Brooklyn Museum, 2015.

the female form through fairytales and folklore. According to Irish mythology a banshee is a female spirit, “whose chilling screams and ghostlike pallor are read as omens of death.” Like the category jungle, the term banshee is also “used to describe women or girls who are seen as wild or inappropriately behaved.” In Ganesh’s accompanying text, she notes that “repeating deathlike masks of a woman’s face asks the viewer to consider how female power relates to beauty and the grotesque.”<sup>255</sup> As another threshold between the human and non-human, the logic of the mask resonates with Ganesh’s boundary figures.

Ganesh also exhibits a drypoint print by Louise Bourgeois, entitled *Eyes* (1996). In Ganesh’s words,

Bourgeois is celebrated for sculptures and drawings that powerfully abstract and critically engage the female form. *Eyes of Time* sheds light on the importance of eyes as visual symbols. The third eye, as seen on Kali, has often been associated with supernatural powers in Indian mythology and continues to appear in contemporary imagery. The act of gazing into numerous eyes might also recall the practice of *darshan*.<sup>256</sup>

Despite Bourgeois’ simple line, her drawing of multiple eyes is psychologically fraught – fleshy and bulging in its materiality yet sedated in its stare. Free-floating against a white blank background, Bourgeois’ meditation on organic form serves as an animated return of the gaze. By connecting these unanchored eyes to the religiously anthropological aspects of Kali, Ganesh brings together multiple epistemologies and perspectives on the

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<sup>255</sup> Chitra Ganesh, artwork label for Kiki Smith, *Untitled*, from the set *Banshee Pearls*, 1991. *Eyes of Time* installation, Brooklyn Museum, 2015.

<sup>256</sup> Chitra Ganesh, artwork label for Louise Bourgeois, *Eyes*, 1996. *Eyes of Time* installation, Brooklyn Museum, 2015.

role of the eye in visual culture (for instance the third eye, *darshan*, the feminist gaze, etc).

Ganesh also exhibits Barbara Jones Hogu's 1971 screen print *Relate to your Heritage*. Hogu was also the founding member of AfriCOBRA, a movement of artists who produced work that reflected attitudes and sensibilities towards black self-determination. This print's representation of multiple fragments of black female figures through a psychedelic aesthetic relates to Ganesh's project in the way it mythologizes cultural icons and a heritage of feminine power. Ganesh's accompanying text states that "[b]oth this work and *Eyes of Time* point to the importance of the feminine form in linking a collective mythic history to present-day autonomy and power."<sup>257</sup> Moreover, Hogu's psychedelic aesthetic, which is familiar in its colorfulness, relates to *Tales of Amnesia* comic accessibility.

And finally, while Japanese artist Shoichi Ida did not necessarily create his abstract works with any overtly cultural, political, or narrative intent, Ganesh includes the color aquatint piece *Between Vertical and Horizon – Descended Triangle No. 6* (1987) for the way its form resonates with one of the key metaphors associated with Kali. Vedic representations of the goddess manifest in pure geometric abstraction or a yantra,<sup>258</sup> which comprises a red and black diagram of interlocking triangles, lotus petals, and other geometric forms. The Kali yantra also symbolizes shakti or female divine energy. While Ida's abstract form adheres to modernist principles that disavow referentiality and representation, Ganesh points to other representational possibilities by bringing together

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<sup>257</sup> Chitra Ganesh, artwork label for Barbara Jones-Hogu, *Relate to your Heritage*, 1971. *Eyes of Time* installation, Brooklyn Museum, 2015.

<sup>258</sup> Yantras are spiritual visualization instruments specific to the philosophy and ritual of Tantra – an esoteric sect of Hinduism and Buddhism.

disparate epistemologies on abstraction.

Ganesh's vitrine makes rich connections that point to new, as yet unexplored narrative potential within museul display. She uses the goddess as an organizing principle to challenge institutional conventions, an icon with its own history of ideological regulation. However, the cybergoddess becomes a metaphor grounded in fantasy that dares to imagine other possibilities for the future of museul display.

### Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I would like to quote the artist vis-à-vis her artistic process and the challenges she encountered with it.

I was really encouraged to do my work from early on – but [my mentors] were also sort of puzzled as to [what] [...] I was doing. I was working within a figurative representational framework, and there was a sense of reading the painting as a transparency, or truth, or autobiography, which I think is partially the burden of artists of color – or women, or anybody who is representing a so-called minority position. Are you actually telling a true story, or your own story? You don't just get to tell a story.<sup>259</sup>

This line, "You don't just get to tell a story" captures Ganesh's objectives in *Tales of Amnesia* and *Eyes of Time*, works of art that re-imagine goddess iconography by breaking down the semiotics and ideologies governing legibility. In *Tales of Amnesia*, her

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<sup>259</sup> Alex Zafiris, "Chitra Ganesh: Of This Time," *Guernica*, December 15, 2014, <https://www.guernicamag.com/of-this-time/>.

playful juxtapositions that center a jungle protagonist call out the hetero-patriarchal nationalism of the *Amar Chitra Katha* comics, while stitching them back onto the caricaturing qualities of the medium. Moreover, she engenders a queer form of storytelling that distorts the conventions of this genre of comic book and the very conventions that have come to codify retellings of mythological stories. Thus, in line with more underground/alterative traditions of comics that play with the genre, the zine format is an apt choice for her restaging of mythological figures. This restaging, which undoes legibility in comics and myths, sutures her project to the inherent disparateness of mythological storytelling. In *Eyes of Time*, the economic line of the comics drawing is mobilized to materialize a cybergoddess figure, one that revises museal display as a matter of institutional critique. By attempting another kind of storytelling about another kind of heroine embedded in fantastic, non-human subjectivity and non-teleological narrative, she not only unhinges her work from a specifically “Indian” or “diasporic” aesthetic, but dares to imagine form in difference.

## IMAGES



Figure 3.1  
SLAAP!!. *Recognize*, 2001. Archival inkjet on duratrans.

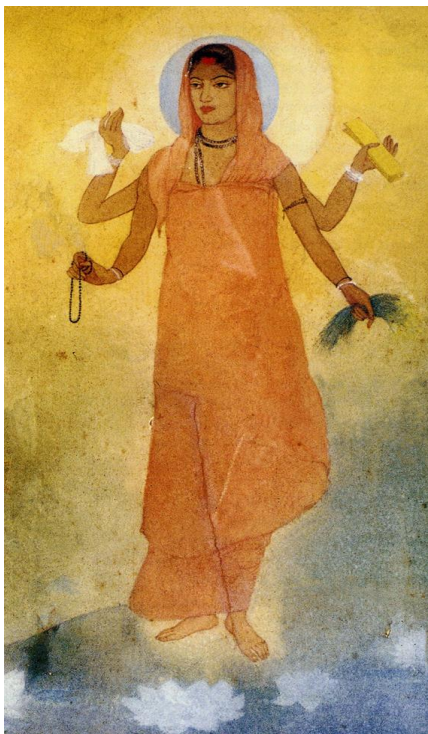


Figure 3.2  
Abanindranath Tagore. *Maha Bharata*, 1905. Watercolor painting.



Figure 3.3  
P.S.Ramachandra Rao. *The Splendour that is India*, circa 1947.

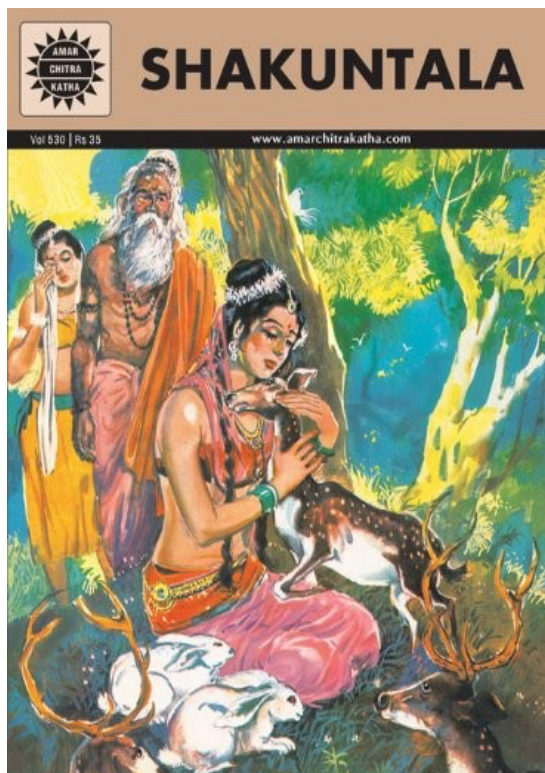


Figure 3.4  
*Shakuntala* cover page from *Amar Chitra Katha* series.



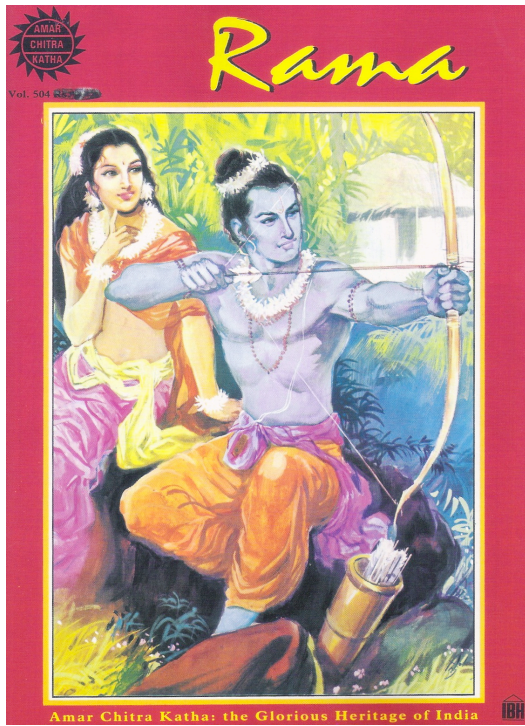


Figure 3.5  
*Rama* cover page from *Amar Chitra Katha* series.

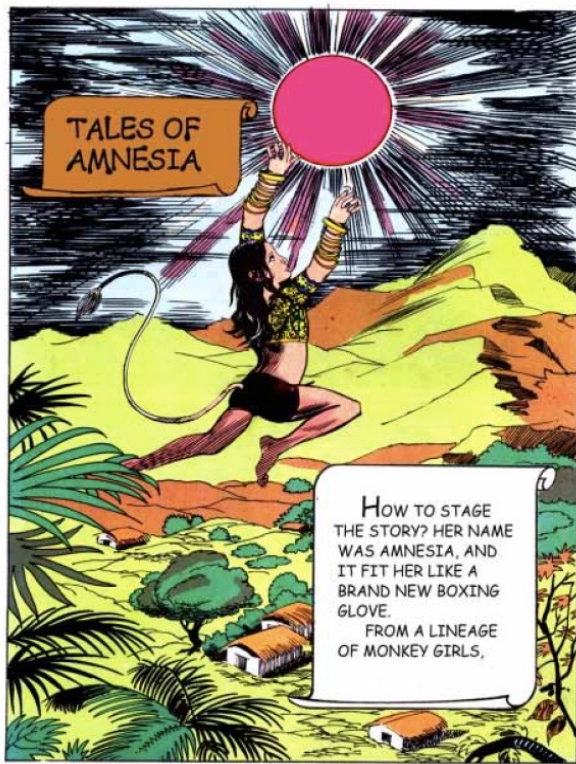


Figure 3.6  
 Chitra Ganesh. Cover page of *Tales of Amnesia*, 2002. zine.



Figure 3.7  
*Tale of Hanuman* cover page from *Amar Chitra Katha* series, 1971.

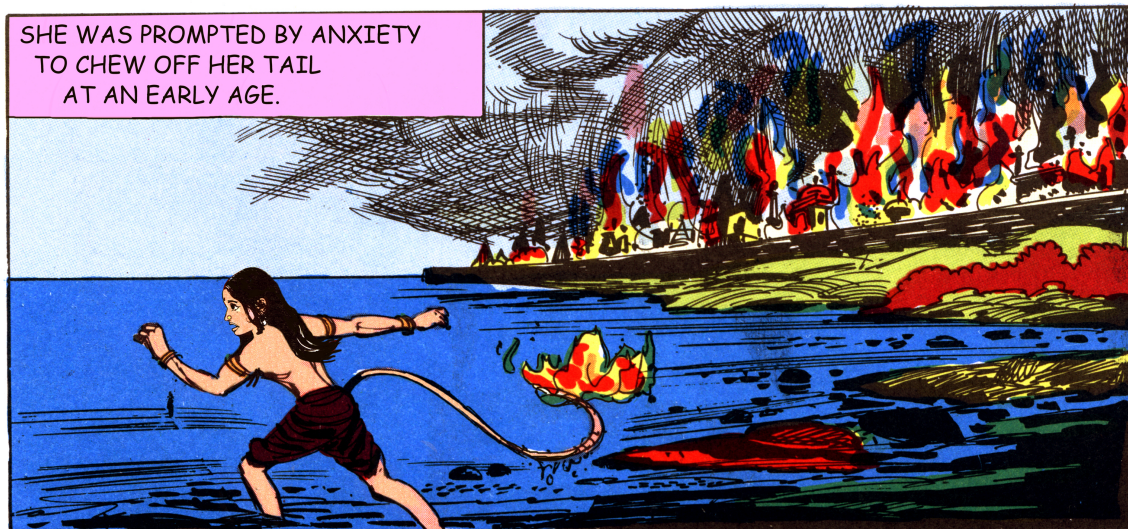


Figure 3.8  
 Chitra Ganesh. Panel from *Tales of Amnesia*, 2002. zine.





Figure 3.9  
Page in *Shiva Parvati* from *Amar Chitra Katha* series, 1972.

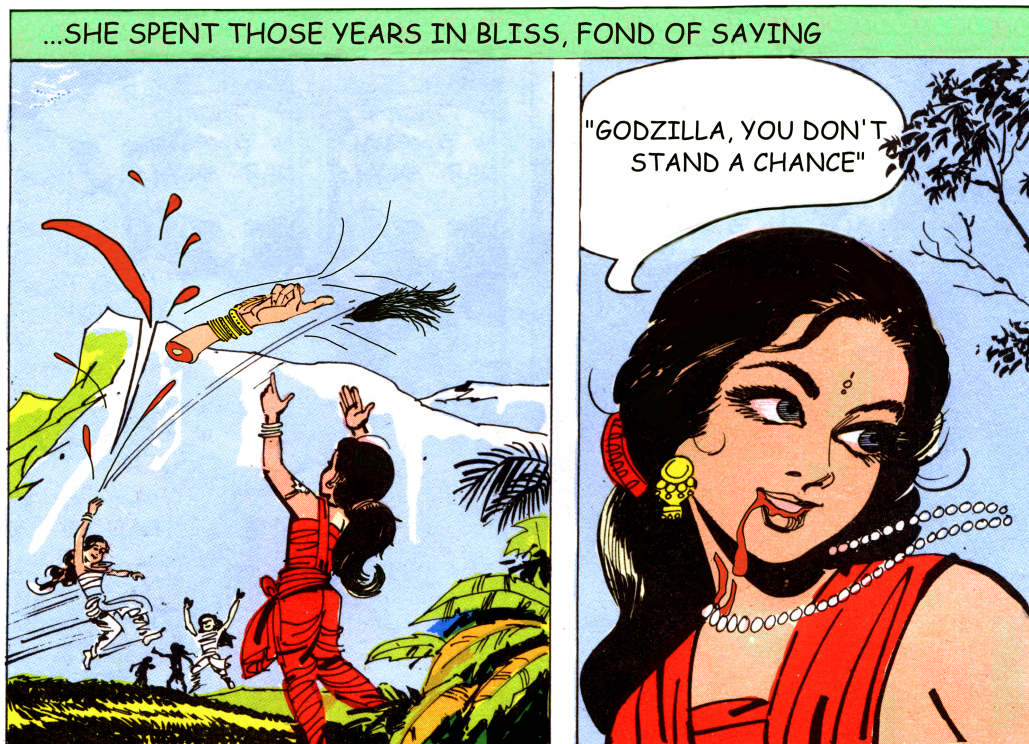


Figure 3.10  
Chitra Ganesh. Panel from *Tales of Amnesia*, 2002. zine.



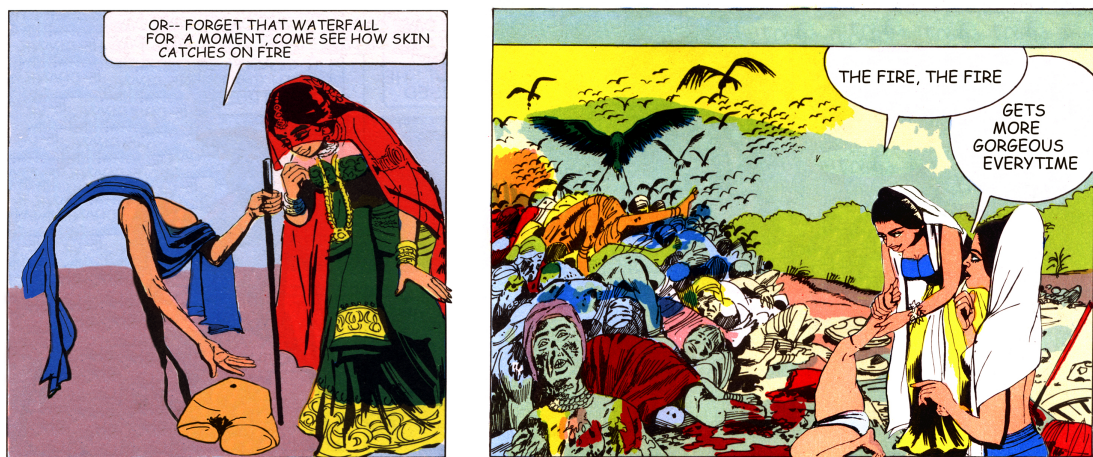


Figure 3.11  
Chitra Ganesh. Panel from *Tales of Amnesia*, 2002. zine.



Figure 3.12  
Page in *Asoka* from *Amar Chitra Katha* series, 1973.



Figure 3.13  
Chitra Ganesh. Panel from *Tales of Amnesia*, 2002. zine.

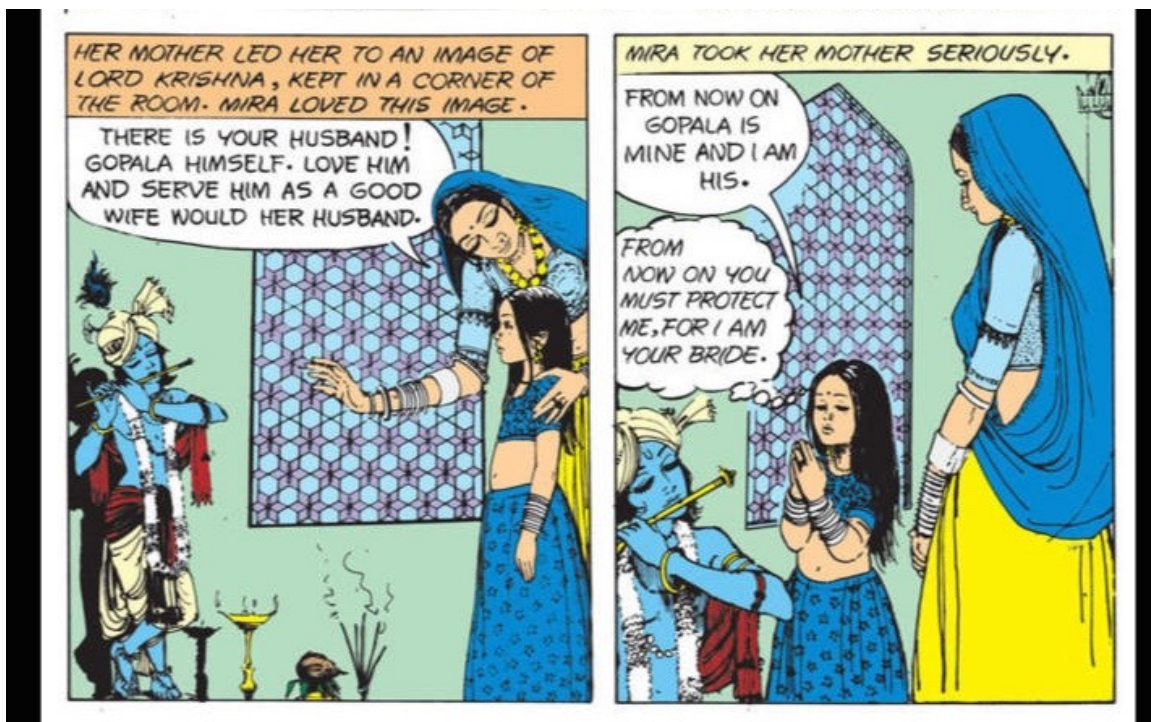


Figure 3.14  
Two adjacent panels in *Mirabai* from *Amar Chitra Katha* series, 1972.





Figure 3.15  
Chitra Ganesh. Panel from *Tales of Amnesia*, 2002. zine.



Figure 3.16  
Chitra Ganesh. *Eyes of Time*, 2014 (installation shots).



Figure 3.17  
Chitra Ganesh. *Eyes of Time*, 2014 (installation shots).

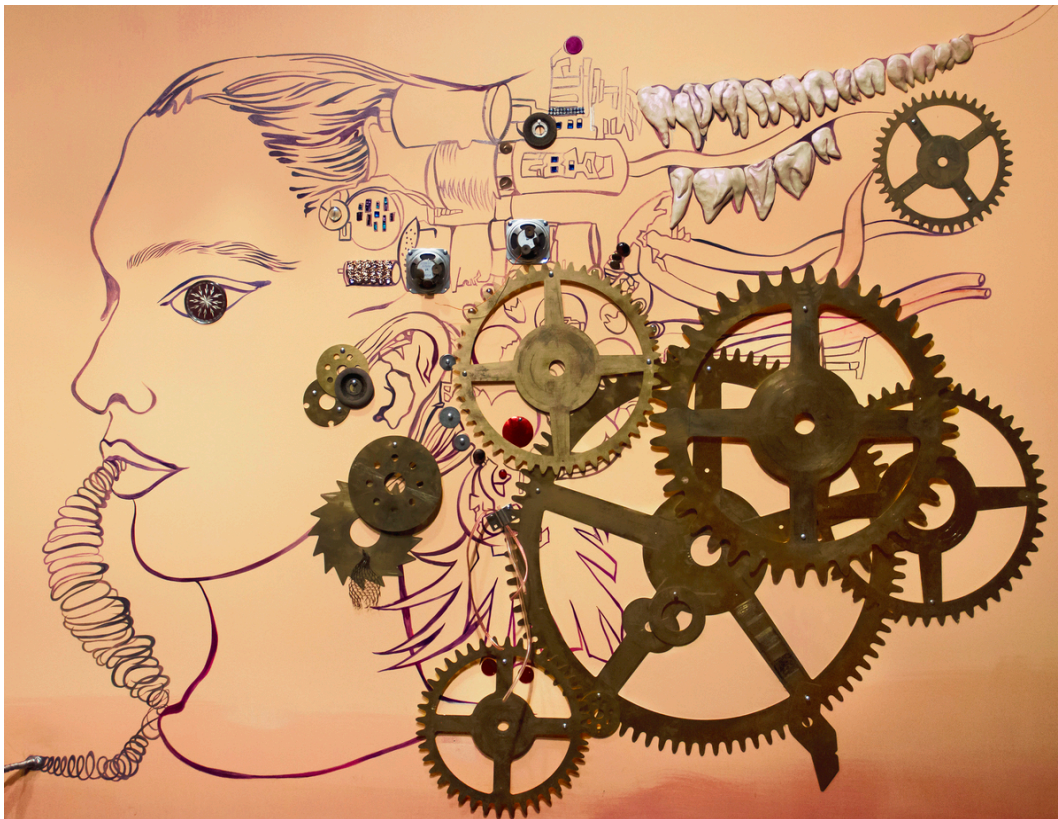


Figure 3.18  
Chitra Ganesh. *Eyes of Time*, 2014 (installation shots).







**CHAPTER FOUR**  
**From Community to Commodity:**  
**The Currency and Limits of Playful Form**

[In] first-year drawing, we would get a naked person in front of us, and I would start drawing them and be like, “This is weird.” I’d never just stared at a naked person. So I would start to put a Spiderman outfit on him. It didn’t matter who it was – it would always turn into Spiderman. But then my teacher would come over and he’d be like, “You know, if you’re going to experiment, why don’t you experiment with arms and legs?” And I was like... “What do you mean?” And he said, “You know, multiple arms, like those Indian gods.”

At that point it clicked for the first time. I realized how people looked at me, which was, you’re Indian, you’re South Asian, you should be doing South Asian art. So I started to make fun of these expectations of whatever it was I was supposed to make.<sup>260</sup>

In this quote, Canadian visual artist Divya Mehra casually remembers a teaching moment during her BFA training that would come to inform the sarcastic tone and dark humor animating much of her practice. She never followed through on her instructor’s recommendation to create a superficial, “East-meets-West” version of multi-limbed superheroes meant to recall Hindu mythological deities. Such a production would have confined the significance of Divya’s work to her cultural origins at the expense of her

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<sup>260</sup> Katy Donoghue, “Divya Mehra,” *White Wall Magazine* (2013), 58.  
<http://www.divyamehra.com/press/?entry=49>

aesthetic labor. But if she had, would she have produced a tongue-and-cheek aberration of these recommendation, and would it have conversed with Chitra Ganesh's goddesses in the previous chapter, especially in a way that dared to imagine other possibilities of meaning for Hindu myth and comics.

Mehra is part of the next generation of artists from the South Asian diaspora to mobilize play in the visual culture of difference. The previous chapters investigate the emergence of artists from the South Asian diaspora in the 1980s and 1990s in London and New York City, and the various ways they engaged a playful aesthetic in their work; the current chapter demonstrates the currency and limits of playful form in emerging art practices today. I use the word "currency" intentionally in this chapter, in two significant ways. Firstly, I track how different aesthetic strategies of playfulness, such as intertextuality and failure, animate emerging art practice in the diaspora. Secondly, and more to my point about "currency," I look at the rise of the art commodity in contemporary art and assess its value as a playful aesthetic. With regard to the limits of playful form, I elaborate on the neoliberal multiculturalism of the art establishment and assess whether the art commodity as a playful aesthetic can work to challenge its forces. I analyze works by two emerging Canadian artists and investigate how they deploy playfulness in the visual culture of difference. I examine how Brendan Fernandes' intertextual dissonance and aesthetics of failure in the video performance *Foe* (2008) refuses to offer a definable notion of difference, particularly in relation to expectations around diasporic sound. With the work of Mehra, I analyze how her art commodities, in the form of blinged-out car frames and gaudy wristwatches, use the language of commodity fetishism but only to degrade their ostensible value. Ultimately, this chapter

queries whether playful aesthetics can contest not only the systemic forces that prescribe the visual culture of difference, but the neoliberal underpinnings of contemporary art making as well.

### Brendan Fernandes' *Foe* (2008): Playful Aesthetic Strategies

In a 2011 interview, Brendan Fernandes explains his video performance *Foe*<sup>261</sup> as an intervention into how language affects cultural identity. However, I hesitate to take the artist at his word because I claim that Fernandes does more than assess the relationship between language, alterity, and identity formation. In this chapter, I re-imagine Brendan Fernandes' *Foe* as a video performance that engages playful aesthetics in the form of intertextuality and failure. I say "re-imagine" because current analysis of his practice prioritizes his hybrid ethnic background as a major source for his artistic inspiration, an analysis that comes at the expense of a more in-depth investigation of his aesthetic labor. For example, a review in the *Toronto Star* describes hybridity in his work as "a fresh take on the old standard of identity politics in contemporary art." Born in Kenya in 1979 of Goan Indian descent, Fernandes immigrated to Toronto at the age of nine and is now largely based in New York City. The review alludes to the multiple migration narratives that inform his family history and lived experience, nuancing conventional understandings of migratory histories that otherwise assume a singular point of departure and point of arrival. Yet hybridity as an organizing principle has dominated aesthetic analysis within a postcolonial diasporic context. According to José Muñoz, hybridity as a

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<sup>261</sup> Brendan Fernandes' video performance *Foe* (2008) is available to view online: <https://vimeo.com/39946897>

concept inadvertently approaches all difference in the same way, thereby flattening particular intricacies and complexities.<sup>262</sup> It is precisely the framing of artists like Fernandes typified by this art review that I aim to trouble and broaden. *Foe* is built around the artist attempting the impossible task of parsing out the so-called accents of his cultural allegiances: Canadian, Indian, and Kenyan. How he does so, via unserious performativity, mocks and undermines the very attempt. Hence, from the onset he sets himself up for failure in order to shatter expectations around what constitutes Kenyan-ness, Indian-ness, diaspora-ness. Rather than emphasize how the artwork enacts hybridity though, I focus on *Foe*'s playful form, and maintain that Fernandes' video performance is more concerned with presenting the other as in fact other: more precisely, as a subject that fails to embody difference in the "right way." His performance makes light of the unexamined expectations attached to diasporic subjectivity.

In the video performance, Fernandes recites excerpts from the 1986 postcolonial novel of the same title by South African author J.M. Coetzee. Fernandes performs the recitation in three different accents,<sup>263</sup> as a way to represent his diasporic background. However, his failed performance ultimately questions expectations attached to such representation. The text in question reads as follows:

"Is Friday an imbecile incapable of speech?" I asked. "Is that what you mean to tell me?" [...] Cruso motioned Friday nearer. "Open your mouth," he told him, and opened his own. Friday opened his mouth. "Look," said

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<sup>262</sup> José Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis, 1999), 78.

<sup>263</sup> Accent is restricted to pronunciation (voice, distinction of vowels and consonants, stress and prosody), and is peculiar to a region/location, social standing/class and possibly ethnicity/nation.

Cruso. I looked, but saw nothing in the dark save the glint of teeth white as ivory. “La-la-la,” said Cruso, and motioned to Friday to repeat.

“Ha-ha-ha,” said Friday from the back of his throat. “He has no tongue,” said Cruso. Gripping Friday by the hair, he brought his face close to mine.

“Do you see?” he said. “It is too dark,” said I. “La-la-la,” said Cruso.

“Ha-ha-ha,” said Friday. I drew away, and Cruso released Friday’s hair.

“He has no tongue,” he said. “That is why he does not speak. They cut out his tongue.”<sup>264</sup>

As a parodic retelling and reimagining of Daniel Defoe’s classic *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), Coetzee’s *Foe* performs and reinforces alterity through intertextual inversion. As the narrative goes, Susan Barton is set adrift and finds herself on an island where she encounters Cruso and his slave named Friday. Friday is “incapable of speech” because his tongue has been cut out; however, his muteness is both literal and figurative, and he offers a powerful point of contrast to Barton, the novel’s only trustworthy witness and narrator. While character names and motifs – the island, the wreck, the master–servant relationship, and the return from seafaring – are parallel between Defoe and Coetzee’s stories, their differentiability ultimately prevails. Coetzee’s *Foe* explicitly connects language and power and develops a storyline where those deemed voiceless do not signify as subjects. However, more than a metaphor for the colonial subject’s

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<sup>264</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Foe*, re-issue edition (London: Penguin, 2010), 22–23.

speechlessness, “indecipherable silences and enigmas”<sup>265</sup> appear in the novel as a mode of resistance. As such, Coetzee mobilizes opacity to call out the limits of representation, simultaneously seeking fullness in absences.

By way of an intermedial gesture, Fernandes’ *Foe* also attends to these “indecipherable silences and enigmas.” His video performance creates a dialogue between the written text and spoken word, rendering Coetzee’s text audible by reciting an excerpt from the novel in the three different accents to which he has cultural allegiance: Indian, Kenyan, and Canadian. In this way, he redirects Coetzee’s postcolonial interventions around language, power, and opacity to contemplate the role accents play in simultaneously illuminating and obscuring diasporic self-articulation. As an aural and embodied dimension of language, accents have the capacity to unmask connections between identity and stereotype. Yet Fernandes’ failed performance of accented voice does something else: not only does it reinforce opacity in alterity, but its aesthetic playfulness, which takes form via deliberate failure, illuminates the absurdity of depicting and achieving alterity. In this way Fernandes’ video performance activates an aesthetics of impossibility and unbecoming, rendering failure a productive moment and an analytical tool. By overturning expectations around what person who is not from “here” should sound like, *Foe* demystifies the fascination with hybridity and the desire to render it easily legible.

Additionally, Fernandes’ installation of *Foe* in multiple sites furthers his intertextual exercises, which also play with the stability of language. Whether at the

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<sup>265</sup> Maria-Jose Chivite de Leon, *Echoes of History, Shadowed Identities: Rewriting Alterity in J.M. Coetzee’s Foe and Marina Warner’s Indigo* (New York: Peter Lang AG, 2011), 47.

Quebec City Biennale (2010), The National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa (2012), or the Deutsche Guggenheim Museum in Las Vegas (2012), the video performance plays in a loop on a flat-screen television on a wall that includes Fernandes' recitation of Coetzee's text. Hand-written in white chalk on a blackboard paint background by the artist at each site, the text enacts yet another performative element of *Foe*: the handwriting makes evident the artist's presence as a trace of his physical labor. Moreover, Fernandes' handwritten text is phonetically rendered, and photocopies of this phonetically rendered text are available for Fernandes' audience to follow along, laboring alongside his efforts in pronunciation in the video performance. As *Foe* weighs both Coetzee's written text and Fernandes' spoken word, the phonetically composed script emphasizes the importance of the latter. Indeed, Fernandes' chalk re-writing intervenes by rendering the official written text subservient to the accented pronunciation of the oral word. On the other side of his photocopy handouts Fernandes includes an image of the ocean and sky, with the horizon in between. As a quintessential allegory for migration, the image of this boundless ocean contextualizes Fernandes' exercises in intertextuality and failure squarely as a matter of diasporic difference.

Visually speaking, Fernandes' *Foe* is composed of various straightforward shots that use a stable camera and even high-key lighting (figure 4.1). *Foe*'s main event is structured around a teaching moment. The video cuts between two kinds of shots: Fernandes reading the Coetzee excerpts from a written script with a blank blackboard in the background on the one hand, and extreme close-ups of his laboring mouth on the

other. An off-screen acting coach, invisible but audible to the viewer, instructs Fernandes on how to deliver the given lines.

*Foe* opens with an extreme close-up of Fernandes' mouth repeating, "Is Friday an imbecile, incapable of speech?" in his Kenyan English accent (figure 4.2). This textual selection and recitation is significant, given how *Foe* addresses the capacity of speech. Coetzee's excerpt, already presented as a fragment of a whole, is further obscured through Fernandes' delivery. For example, he denies his audience the satisfaction of hearing complete sentences. He repeats words and phrases such as, "Friday," "dark," "Cruso," "teeth white as ivory," and "he brought his face," to emulate the learning process, yet they are severed from their textual context. Thus, rather than lead to clarity, repetition here causes obscurity. Articulated words, otherwise familiar and meaningful, morph into abstracted sound. Furthermore, Fernandes does not iterate full, complete sentences in large part because the acting coach's instructions take on the form of interjected corrections that disrupt his narrative flow. Because of the constant repetitions and disruptions imposed on the spoken text, the audience is unable to experience the excerpt in its entirety. In this way ruptured sound is a primary aspect of *Foe*'s form.

Focusing on the movements of Fernandes' mouth as he pronounces and repeats words and phrases, the extreme close-ups in *Foe* draw attention to the physical act of speech. Close-ups of his mouth and face – showing the physical, bodily stretching and muscle memory, the lyrical intonations, the furrowed forehead marking his frustration – embody the enactment and mechanics of speech (figures 4.3, 4.4, and 4.5). This obvious strenuous effort visible on Fernandes' face and mouth and audible in the sound of his



voice, alongside his laborious yet inevitably insufficient and unsuccessful utterances, altogether disrupt comprehension and communication.

As repetition leads to sonic rupture, the uncomfortably extreme close-ups of Fernandes' moving mouth also distort conventional conceptions of the body. In their excessive repetition and deformity, these close-ups render speech and communication grotesque. Mikhail Bakhtin,<sup>266</sup> situating his theory of the carnivalesque in the open, orificed body (as opposed to the enclosed classical body), argues that the gaping abyss of the mouth is the most explicit feature of the grotesque. In the close-ups of Fernandes' cavernous mouth one sees his tongue emerge from the darkness to frenetically dance behind a jagged wall of unevenly lined teeth, enveloped by a thick frame of fleshy lips. Fernandes' grotesque mouth relates to language. Tugging at his cheeks to better aspirate his words, to get a better sense of where the air should pass, Fernandes breaks communication down to its very basic and intuitive mechanics, overturning the assumption that language is innate.

Recalling how *Foe* begins with a tight close-up of Fernandes' mouth, asking "is Friday an imbecile incapable of speech," the video performance urges his audience to contemplate this very question for the duration of the performance. He also repeats certain phrases over and over again, such as "dark," or "teeth white as ivory," or "his face," or "cut out his tongue" with the same intention and effect. Not coincidentally, these repetitions center around the figure of Friday. In their excess and deformity, they shed light on the grotesqueness that a muted and enslaved position represents. Rather

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<sup>266</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1968).

than mirror Coetzee's deconstruction of alterity, though, Fernandes' *Foe* brings voice to what the failure to speak might sound like. That said, it is critical to note that Friday's and Fernandes' failure to speak function on categorically different registers. If Fernandes "cannot speak," he fails at meeting the expected conventions around what a particular culture should sound like, and so cannot speak "properly," as per the invisible acting coach's instructions. Indeed, there is an antagonistic dissonance to *Foe* that deliberately separates Fernandes' attempts at articulation from the official sound of language. This is how *Foe* deploys the grotesque as an overturning tool.

As an object of analysis, the notion of an accent assumes a prior form from which it derives. Accents are thus already marked as "unoriginal," since the notion of an "original accent" is oxymoronic. Is not an accent an inherent aberration of form? Certainly, British and/or American English are systemically prioritized, but even then there are countless locally inflected versions of the British and American accent that fracture the ostensible monolithic wholeness of such categories and their hegemonies. Fernandes speaks in non-specific accents that can be broadly defined as sounding Kenyan, or Indian, or Canadian. In other words, these accents do not betray specificities vis-à-vis region, class, or mother-tongue fluency for instance. Instead, they embody broad, sweeping stereotypes of what Kenyan, Indian, or Canadian accents should sound like, thereby voicing false expectations and representations of what it means to be (and sound) Kenyan, Indian, or Canadian. For this reason I believe accents can more accurately be viewed as copies *without* an original.

What does it mean to fail at an accent that is already marked and experienced as unoriginal, as a copy in a system of copies without originals, in a world order that prioritizes some accents over others despite the sheer constructedness of this originality? Beyond the camera the acting couch – the voice, ostensibly, of reason, but also of regulation – asks Fernandes to maneuver the air in his mouth to hit his tongue rather than the back of his front teeth, because that is the way you are *supposed* to create the appropriate sound for that specific iteration. Yet despite clear instructions, Fernandes’ sound is not contained by his inheritance or these instructions, and as such spills over. What does it mean to inherit accents, to be instructed these accents, to perform them and to fail at this performance? This failed performance that manifests as excess subverts expectations around what language should sound like. And while the blackboard behind Fernandes reinforces the pedagogical moment of the performance, its clean, pristine surface also serves as a blank slate, invoking the possibility of new or renewed forms of knowledge-making.

Jack Halberstam’s notion of failure is useful with regard to Fernandes’ performance of accented voice. In *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), he interrogates society’s drive towards “success” as an unquestioned good and examines how various normative structures condition narratives of progress, confining what constitutes an appropriate set of aspirations and what does not. Halberstam maps a few detours around this regulatory management of human development and develops a theory that offers better ways of failing. For example, whereas failure skirts around disciplinary knowledge production, which “depends on and deploys normalization, routines, [...], tradition, [and]

regularity,”<sup>267</sup> Halberstam advocates for stupidity as a method of (un)knowing. Beyond an easily dismissal lack of knowledge, he re-imagines the bounds of stupidity to refer to the limits of certain forms of knowing. Likewise, he advocates for forgetfulness as a method of (un)knowing that “resists heroic and grand logics of recall and unleashes new forms of memory that relate to [...] lost genealogies rather than to inheritance, to erasure rather than to inscription.”<sup>268</sup> Bearing these theoretical interventions in mind, Fernandes’ performance enacts an intentional stupidity and an intentional forgetfulness that offer release from the pressures of “succeeding” as a diasporic subject. And, given the blank chalkboard that frames the performance as a teaching moment, *Foe* also highlights how pedagogy comprises part accumulation, part erasure.

Within the context of Fernandes’ intertextual exercises, I view failure not only as a playful aesthetic that broadens conceptions of diaspora within the visual culture of difference, but one that challenges the neoliberal multiculturalism of the contemporary global art world. *Foe*’s failure refuses to create an easily packageable notion of difference and undermines any attempt to do so. In the next section, I examine the neoliberal multiculturalism of the art world and interrogate whether the art commodity, another aesthetic strategy with the potential for playful upending, poses a challenge to the increasing marketability of difference.

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<sup>267</sup> Jack Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 7.

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

## Commodity Art and Neoliberal Multiculturalism

As ethics philosopher Will Kymlicka observes, “nation states have been distrustful of minority ethnic political mobilization, which they stigmatized as disloyal, backward, and balkanizing.”<sup>269</sup> In this way, human difference has been understood as a “disadvantage to be denied or hidden.”<sup>270</sup> Historically, this power imbalance has been reduced to binary relationalities such as “conqueror and conquered, colonizer and colonized, settler and indigenous, racialized and unmarked, normalized and deviant, orthodox and heretic, civilized and backward, ally and enemy, master and slave.”<sup>271</sup> In the 1960s, various political efforts mobilized in unprecedented ways and re-conceived ethnic minorities as productive members of a democratic state. Grassroots movements led to anti-discriminatory laws committed to re-imagining citizenship, grounded in a social and racial liberalism that prioritized political participation and economic opportunity in service of social acceptance. However, this “imperative to love difference,”<sup>272</sup> to quote Sara Ahmed, would prove to be conditional.

Initially, and on the surface, the aim of cultural pluralism is to bind communities together; however Ahmed unpacks how this affective drive feeds an imagined national ideal that circumscribes difference, transforming it into likeness. In other words, there is only one legitimate way to be the other: in a way that supplements national cohesion. If unsuccessful in this aim, human difference is no longer met with hospitality but is re-interpreted as a disturbance to be quelled instead. As Lisa Lowe maintains,

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<sup>269</sup> Will Kymlicka, “Neoliberal Multiculturalism?” in *Social Resilience In the Neoliberal Era*, ed. Peter Hall and Michèle Lamont. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 101.

<sup>270</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>272</sup> Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 133.

“multiculturalism is central to the maintenance of a consensus that permits the present hegemony,”<sup>273</sup> one that disregards histories of exploitation and present-day material inequities – which ultimately amount to “differential forms of disempowerment”<sup>274</sup> – in pursuit of a mythic representation of diversity.

With the advent of neoliberalism – beginning with the end of the cold war, which gave way to the eventual reign of unfettered global capital – multiculturalism would adopt a new emphasis, namely the *productivity* of difference. Co-opting multiculturalism’s social liberalist aspirations around citizenship to mine its profit potential, neoliberal multiculturalism emerged: the “belief that ethnic identities and attachments can be assets to market actors.”<sup>275</sup> In fundamental and arguably irrevocable ways, the neoliberal moment transformed the initial ethos of multiculturalism into an instrument of control, a biopolitical tool of domestication in service of the capitalist regime of accumulation. This paradigmatic shift flattened the specific tensions and oppositions between racial groups. A competitive management of diversity, the advent of neoliberal multiculturalism effectively appropriated the promise of representational progress while displacing and detaching itself from histories of racial conflict and anti-racist struggle. For cultural studies scholar Jodi Melamed, the question “What can brown do for you?”<sup>276</sup> (which she borrows from a UPS advertising campaign) cleverly encapsulates the core gist of neoliberalism’s demands on multiculturalism. The question distorts pride and solidarity amongst communities of color into a “happy subservience

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<sup>273</sup> Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 86.

<sup>274</sup> Jeff Chang in Lowe, 95.

<sup>275</sup> Kymlicka, 109.

<sup>276</sup> Jodi Melamed, “The Spirit of Neoliberalism: From Racial Liberalism to Neoliberal Multiculturalism,” *Social Text* 24, no. 4 (2006), 13.

promising efficient access to the global economy.”<sup>277</sup> Neoliberal multiculturalism embraces racial and ethnic difference insofar as it can commodify it.

As the multiculturalist project increasingly distanced itself from its initial social liberalist intentions, it would become more and more synonymous with social capital. And what better example of social capital than art? In *Art Incorporated* (2004), Julian Stallabrass dispels the notion that contemporary art exists within a zone of freedom, suspended and set apart from everyday notions of instrumentality and commerce. He traces connections between the apparent unruliness of contemporary art and the market, shedding light on how free trade is not antithetical to free art, but is in fact a conditioning factor. Exposing the largely invisible affinity between contemporary art and capital, Stallabrass examines how the end of the cold war coincided with major shifts in institutional practices. In particular, they became “steadily more commercial as they internalized corporate models of activity, establishing alliance with business, bringing their products closer to commercial culture, and modeling themselves less on libraries than shops and theme parks.”<sup>278</sup> These developments accompanied the global proliferation of biennales and fairs. Alongside the rise of the nomadic curator, these new trends in the art world would cater to cosmopolitan taste rather than the local audiences who footed the bill for hosting.

After 1989, as migration and globalization intensified in unprecedented ways, changes within the art establishment followed suit. Institutions and curators began questioning and exposing the ethno-centric and racist structures governing art

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<sup>277</sup> Ibid.

<sup>278</sup> Julian Stallabrass, *Art Incorporated: The Story of Contemporary Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 14.

institutions. Beyond seeing art as a vehicle for identity politics, the possibility of it becoming a genuine platform that spoke to the complexities of cultural difference and that finally provincialized Euro-American monopolies on aesthetic taste seemed imminent.<sup>279</sup> Yet, as Stallabrass incisively observes, the “rise of the prominent multicultural show exactly coincides with the end of the cold war.”<sup>280</sup> Likewise, the rise of new art regions parallels the rise of new branding strategies with an eye for advertisement, marketing, and the spectacular as part and parcel of global aesthetic production. Thus, while the rise of political art broadened the horizons of curatorial pursuits, it was simultaneously enabled and impeded by the global turn: rather than transforming representation within the art establishment, diversity was instead sedated and normalized. As identity politics became tokenized and absorbed by market demands, the art world found more value in parading difference as masquerade, entertainment, and spectacle for its newly cosmopolitan audience.<sup>281</sup> These pursuits would inevitably stifle and override aesthetic strategies with overtly political intentions.

This shift is especially apparent when comparing art production in London in the 1980s from the Black Arts Movement and that of the next generation of artists in the UK such as Yinka Shonibare and Chris Ofili. As Kobena Mercer observes, artists were relieved of the “burden of representation” yet also felt pressured to brandish a black

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<sup>279</sup> Anne Ring Peterson, “Identity Politics, Institutional Multiculturalism, and the Global Artworld,” *Third Text* 26, no. 2 (March, 2012), 196.

Also see:

Ed. Hans Belting et al., *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of the New Art Worlds* (Karlsruhe: ZKM/Center for Art and Media, 2013).

<sup>280</sup> Stallabrass, 11.

<sup>281</sup> For more on the contemporary global art market, see:

Donald N. Thompson, *The \$12 Million Stuffed Shark: the Curious Economics of Contemporary Art* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

Terry Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009).



aesthetic that was easily digestible within an increasingly privatized and globally biennialized art market.<sup>282</sup> Rather than push the conversation forward, institutional multiculturalism has been deployed as a regulatory force, acting as gatekeeper to the conception and reception of the visual culture of difference in order to maintain the cultural hegemony of whiteness. As I elaborate in chapter one, the reception of shows like *The Other Story* (1989) in London and *Fatal Love* (2005) in New York City emphasized their contributions as visibility projects at the expense of a more in-depth formal analysis of the various aesthetic strategies at work.<sup>283</sup>

If, as Lowe states, “multiculturalism [...] aestheticizes ethnic difference,”<sup>284</sup> how might aesthetic production that challenges the way multiculturalism flattens material inequities offer a paradigmatic shift? In a market programmed to package, name, and define difference, members of the South Asian diaspora are constantly juggling what is possible and what is impossible for their category. The 1980s and 1990s ushered in new ways of seeing and framing difference, but continuing to incite opposition to structurally encroaching forces after the age of multiculturalism has caved in to capital remains a challenge. I suggest *Foe* as an example that stands out, given how, as a failed performance of diasporic subjectivity, Fernandes’ piece refuses to be an easily packageable, and thus consumable, definition of difference. In addition to failure, Fernandes has developed other aesthetic strategies that attempt to undermine

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<sup>282</sup> Kobena Mercer, “Ethnicity and Internationality: New British Art and Diaspora-Based Blackness,” *Third Text* 49, no. 4 (Winter, 1999-2000): 54–58.

<sup>283</sup> For more on neoliberal multiculturalism in art world see, Jean Fisher, “The Syncretic Turn: Cross-Cultural Practices in the Age of Multiculturalism,” in *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*. eds. Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung, 2nd edition (Chicester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 329–337.

<sup>284</sup> Lisa Lowe, 9. Note that Lowe’s use of “aestheticization” renders the target objects separate from history and politics. A politics of aesthetics, a position I pursue in this dissertation, works against this apolitical stance for aesthetics.

neoliberalism's grip over multiculturalism. In several works he turns to the art commodity as a way to overturn narratives of difference. In the following section, I elaborate on his works that center the African mask as a quintessential commodity of difference. However, I am skeptical of his approach. While playful, given the object's nod to masquerade, his masks' intermedial translation into bright neon lights arguably plays more into the hands of neoliberal multiculturalism than posing a challenge. Herein lie the limits of play.

Since Marcel Duchamp's original readymade gesture, artists have extracted objects from their daily context and turned them into art. In the era of contemporary art more specifically – in works by artists like Andy Warhol, Jeff Koons, Takashi Murakami, Jimmie Durham, Gabriel Orozco, Damien Hirst, Yinka Shonibare, Ai Weiwei, Subodh Gupta, and Fred Wilson – this gesture has not only become quite pervasive, it has also incorporated a noted shift in strategy that “witness[es] the emerging global dimensions of a commodity's becoming.”<sup>285</sup> According to contemporary art and critical theory scholar Jaimey Hamilton Faris, art no longer uses the readymade to comment on the status of art as commodity (when the everyday object becomes art), but rather deploys the readymade to explore the moment when materiality becomes commodity. That is to say, the artists' selections and installations are often inspired by the complexity of the meaning an object evokes, its historical trajectories: what Arjun Appadurai describes as the social life of the commodity.<sup>286</sup> In this vein, Fernandes engages with the mask as a commodity in order to

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<sup>285</sup> Jaimey Hamilton Faris, *Uncommon Goods: Global Dimensions of the Readymade* (Bristol; Chicago: Intellect, 2013), 7.

<sup>286</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

address how anthropological artifacts in museums embody simultaneously the status of cultural capital and tourist commodity.

Given how visibility projects have only masqueraded inclusionism, the mask, as a commodity *and* a playful object, embodies a rich confluence that Fernandes engages in several of his works. He intentionally turns to the African mask as an emblem of the exotification of colonial iconography by virtue of the global tourist's insatiable hunger for "authentic" access to the other. In his installation *Neo Primitivism II* (2007), he displays several plastic deer decoys that each sport faux white resin replicas of iconic Masai mask carvings in a safari green room (figure 4.6). He does so to recast the spiritual artifact as a "throwaway commodity and tourist tchotchke."<sup>287</sup> Fernandes' aesthetic engagement with the mask as a commodity derives from his encounters with western African immigrant vendors in Chinatown and outside major museums such as MoMA, the Whitney, and the Metropolitan selling masks to meet high tourist demand. These masks are sold as authentic objects "from Africa," yet the vendors and craftsmen reveal to him how the masks are in reality carved in Chelsea warehouses. How does a mask sold as though it is "from Africa" become desirable within New York City's tourist trade? While the mask's semiotics read as exotic Africa *and* New York City souvenir, Fernandes' *Neo Primitivism II* articulates the "absurdity of the clichés assigned to African realities"<sup>288</sup> in addition to the absurdity of flippant international consumption.

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<sup>287</sup> Murray White, "The Art World Likes Where He's Coming From," *The Star*, August 1, 2010. [http://www.thestar.com/entertainment/2010/08/01/art\\_world\\_likes\\_where\\_hes\\_coming\\_from.html#article](http://www.thestar.com/entertainment/2010/08/01/art_world_likes_where_hes_coming_from.html#article)

<sup>288</sup> Pamela McClusky. "Disguise: How the Masquerade Takes Shape," in *Disguise: Masks and Global African Art*, (Seattle: Seattle Art Museum, 2015), 71.

A work like *Neo Primitivism II* makes explicit how western imaginaries enact reductive notions of African collectivity. In the artist's words:

I put fake masks on fake deer. The masks are just like those sold on Canal Street, next to the fake handbags and Rolexes. They become a memento of a "real New York City experience" and are not like any "real Kenyan experience." The plastic deer were made as decoys to be used by hunters. These deer wearing masks make a clumsy parade in a room painted "safari green." Two inauthentic objects are merged and it just doesn't work, except to show how we keep the fake idea of the primitive alive.<sup>289</sup>

Fernandes' facetious mention of the "real Kenyan experience" refers to how Masai objects have become a stand-in commodity for authentic Africa. Yet the Masai people are a community specific to Kenya and they do not even wear masks as part of their rituals. Masks are more prevalent in West African traditions. Thus, the "Masai mask" is pure invention – completely fabricated for a foreign market that is ironically invested in authenticity. In another work composed of neon signs and titled *From Hiz Hands* (2010)<sup>290</sup> Fernandes makes light of the intricacies between mask traditions and flattens them to parodic effect (figure 4.7). However, while I am invested in an aesthetic and formal analysis of his work that stretches beyond associations with his hybrid identity, I ultimately question whether his engagement with the mask as a commodification of difference actually challenges neoliberal multiculturalism.

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<sup>289</sup> Brendan Fernandes, "Disguise: Art, Artists, and their Words," in *Disguise*, 30.

<sup>290</sup> First showed at (from the installation and solo show at Art in General in 2011; then in *Disguise* at The Brooklyn Museum.

Designed as African masks – modeled on Bamana and Wainama masks from the Metropolitan Museum of Art archives (Nelson Rockefeller estate bequests) – the Bamana peoples of Mali are invoked by the green, four-pronged piece, a Ntomo mask that young Bamana men typically wear as part of a process of ethical education in adolescence; the Bamana are also invoked by the horned cow, reminiscent of the Komo society of elite and spiritually advanced blacksmiths. And finally, the grotesque, checkered hyena face, which derives from a group in neighboring Burkina Faso, represents a “bush” spirit in animal form.<sup>291</sup> While the masks from the Metropolitan represent disparate traditions and functions within masquerade ceremonies, Fernandes’ use of neon lights as his sole material intentionally flattens these differences into crass signs designated for commerce. As Fernandes’ bright, neon light sculptures hang in the gallery’s window front, their kitsch materiality connects with their immediate environment: the cacophony of advertising of the Lower Manhattan street. And finally, the masks blink in Morse code patterns, thereby countering the notion of masks as “voiceless ambassadors.”<sup>292</sup>

Fernandes’ flattening of nuances has a deracinating effect, and echoes how museal narrative conventions also embrace a comparable flattening. If within a museum context masks are displayed as static pre-colonial relics, they are also valued as acquisitions that reflect an institution’s cultural capital. Fernandes’ intermedial gesture translates African masks into commercial objects. Through neon – the highly legible vernacular language of advertising – he makes explicit the museum’s investment in cultural capital. Like a number of contemporary global artists, Fernandes takes the

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<sup>291</sup> Ian Bourland, “Exile on Canal Street: Brendan Fernandes,” 16.  
<http://www.brendanfernandes.ca/new-page-1/>

<sup>292</sup> McCluskly, “Disguise,” 80.

commodification of stereotype and difference *as* the subject of his work. For example, Yinka Shonibare uses the batik textile as a stereotypically African commodity to tell a complex story about the circulation of raw material and commodities between Southeast Asia and African British and Dutch colonies. Shonibare's play with authenticity has been well received within a neoliberal multicultural art world that has made space for a very specific vision of difference: a sellable kind. And so, while Shonibare's work makes a sharp postcolonial critique on the colonized commodity, it also caters to global market demands.

By contrast, the artist Fred Wilson mobilizes the commodity of the African mask in the service of institutional critique. In *The Other Museum* (1990), Wilson transformed a gallery space into a pseudo museum in order to mock the cultural containment and racial hierarchies inherent to ethnographic display. In a subsection of the installation titled *Spoils*, six wooden African masks blindfolded by colonial flags (French and British) hang over a vitrine of insect specimens and historical documents. Over one of the masks Wilson projects the image of a woman's face, alongside a voiceover pleading, "Don't just look at me; listen to me. Don't just own me; understand me. Don't just talk about me; talk to me. I am still alive."<sup>293</sup> *The Other Museum* takes the art institution to task, manipulating the commodity to call out the art world's neoliberal multiculturalism. Shonibare's art commodity, meanwhile, does not engender an institutional critique, and his interventions are thus not antagonistic towards the market. Both Shonibare and Wilson are successful artists in their own right; I compare them to bring attention to the

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<sup>293</sup> Jennifer Gonzalez, *Subject to Display: Reframing Race In Contemporary Installation Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), 69.

unresolved tensions that exist around the marketability of blackness as black artists create politically poignant aesthetic commentary.

Arguably Fernandes also attempts an institutional critique of the mask's use, circulation, and value; however I question whether his engagement of the mask, as a non-black artist, is fully accountable. Fernandes often cites his Kenyan lineage when elaborating on his work on African masks. It is important to note that Fernandes is a fifth-generation Kenyan of South Asian descent. The South Asian presence in East African countries like Kenya is fraught, and the narratives of Afro-Asian affiliations and tensions are intricate. During the British colonial rule of Kenya (1895–1963), South Asians increasingly settled the land. They came as traders and skilled workers because the British preferred to relocate skilled laborers rather than train unskilled local workers. By the time of independence in 1963, the South Asian population constituted only 2% of the nation's population, but made up 30% of the population of Nairobi, the most cosmopolitan part of the country, and the majority of the nation's petty bourgeoisie. A Swahili proverb, “The Hindu Bania trader is evil, but his shoes are medicine” (which translates roughly to “Indians are mean, but their business is good”), encapsulates the feelings of resentment that inevitably ensued.<sup>294</sup> British Indian subjects in colonies outside India were intimately tied to the expansion of the empire. Especially after 1895, they aggressively established permanent settlements that aligned with the colonial state, especially in the way the British relied on Indian business expertise to create and maintain a monetary colonial economy. In short, their vision encompassed an “America

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<sup>294</sup> Sana Aiyar, *Indians in Kenya* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 3.

for the Hindu.”<sup>295</sup> Furthermore, it was in the empire’s best interest to maintain a racial pyramid, which was established in various sectors such as the economy, political representation, and access to education. Because of the impenetrable boundary between South Asians and Africans, interracial marriages were rare and unwelcome.

After WWII, another new generation of traders, skilled artisans, and professionals migrated to Kenya and brought with them more anti-colonial critiques. As they witnessed their South Asian homeland transition to a postcolonial nation, their civilizational claims shifted accordingly. If at first South Asians in Kenya positioned themselves as imperial citizens and sub-imperialist merchants (to gain parity with European settlers), whose role was to bring modernity to Africa in the form of trade, the anti-colonial moment in British India incited a more universalist and racially equitable political shift. Nevertheless, Afro-Asian solidarities were tenuous and not without their historical hierarchies. Alongside a paternalistic approach to postcolonial nationalism, South Asians also represented the most visible accumulation of wealth and, as such, the most immediate obstacle to black economic aspirations. At times the tension turned violent, mostly in the form of property damage, which fed narratives of black crime and “savagery.” African anti-colonial nationalist politics were divided on the matter of South Asian allyship, especially as South Asians perpetuated racial hierarchies by insisting on maintaining endogamous practices in business. With independence, the new Kenyan government decided that South Asians would remain as permanent immigrants with rights subordinated to the

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<sup>295</sup> Ibid., 8.



interests of indigenous citizens; by 1968, a massive voluntary exodus proved unavoidable.<sup>296</sup>

This complex history and these black and brown tensions are not necessarily apparent in Fernandes' work – certainly not in his African masks. With a father working as an accountant in Kenya's safari industry, Fernandes has been exposed to the commercial success of selling "African authenticity" as his family's main source for livelihood. Fernandes turns to the African mask to critique its status as a commodity, and while abstracting the object of its cultural specificity has conceptual uses, to do so in a way that cites African heritage but that does not account for Afro-Asian tensions as a non-black artist gives me pause. I do not aim to police art making or dictate how artworks speak to or evade specific identitarian positions; however, there is a network of power dynamics that requires unpacking – for example, the white history of art that has for so long spoken for difference, and as such is suspect. Additionally, several actors in the art world have been banking on the marketability of blackness, which is also suspect. Thus I call upon artists to account for their positionality vis-à-vis their chosen subject matter, especially within the context of the colonial encounter that has affected various geographies, histories, and communities, in multiple and unequal ways. Not accounting for the nuances of one's position risks flattening these critical differences.

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<sup>296</sup> Ibid., 12–19.

Afro-Asian interracial alliances and ruptures are generally historicized as mutually exclusive, however, in *Indians in Kenya* Sana Aiyar discusses them in relation to one another.

## Divya Mehra's Art Commodities: Challenging Neoliberal Multiculturalism?

As I state at the opening of this dissertation's introduction, Divya Mehra has developed a reputation for her tongue-in-cheek aesthetic and her "bad attitude" towards all things Indian. By the time Mehra was graduating from the University of Manitoba's School of Art in 2005, the politics of recognition that characterize art making and criticism during the 1980s and 1990s had already become ingrained in the art institution, and artists of color were burdened with catering to the market in prescriptive ways. For her BF degree final project she created a series of twenty-seven self-portraits that she laid out in a grid. The photographs were all identical with the exception of a singular photoshopped detail: the color of her forehead bindi (figure 4.8). Akin to how a mood ring functions, each color is intended to evoke a different emotional state. Purposefully and facetiously conflating the forehead dress with pseudo-spiritual new-age trinkets, Mehra calls out stereotypes of South Asian culture. She makes use of this aesthetic wink, because in the artist's words, "sometimes all you can do is laugh at the sheer spectacle of it all."<sup>297</sup> Although Mehra wanted to critique western imaginations of South Asia and South Asianness, her BFA panel of judges berated her approach as "not South Asian enough" – an expectation around identity her white peers were never constrained to meet. The panel did not appreciate her humor and accused her of not taking the assignment seriously. She was thus obliged to redo the final project to obtain her degree. As a result, she learned to negotiate her playful aesthetic more discreetly.

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<sup>297</sup> Divya Mehra, personal interview, February 24, 2017.

Bearing in mind the expectation of creating a sense of “South Asianness,” she filled an entire gallery floor with tumeric powder and basmati rice and flippantly titled the installation *Curry and Rice* (2004). Although her initial final project was too jarring for the University of Manitoba, the aesthetic interventions of her second installation curiously flew under the radar. Her conceptual form sidetracked her panel of judges and they viewed the work as a clever abstraction of Indian cuisine as cultural commentary. They were blind to Mehra’s sarcastic tone, which was actually poking fun at their straightforward aesthetic expectations. Playing to their myopic associations of spice and color with the region, *Curry and Rice* ultimately calls into question their entire rubric for what constitutes “good” South Asian art – messaging that ultimately went unseen.

After this difficult lesson as a budding artist still trying to develop an aesthetic despite pigeonholing forces, Mehra completed her MFA at Columbia in 2008, and her professional practice today persists by challenging institutional prescriptions of what difference should look like. As an emerging artist based in Winnipeg, Canada who has exhibited all over the country, in the United States, and in India, Mehra has held on to her frustrations with the art establishment and makes work that is antagonistic towards the reification of difference in contemporary art. She turns to sarcasm to reveal hypocrisy and jolts her audiences into recognizing the ruses of multiculturalism. Manipulating readymades through an aesthetics of play – often in the form of a sardonic laugh – Mehra dissects the commodification of difference. From luxury objects (both authentic and counterfeit), a neon signs of recognizable icons, hip hop music and lyrics, multicolor Valentine’s Day heart candies stamped, “enjoy diversity,” purchasing advertising space in an art magazine and labeling it “art,” to a suit literally made out of Canadian hundred-

dollar bills, Mehra transforms her chosen commodities in a way that plays out stereotypes and underscores the fetishistic appetite of consuming difference. And while by deploying the commodity as art she risks being absorbed by the art market, her aesthetic treatment effectively degrades the value of her objects. Furthermore, her harsh tone in calling out whiteness and constraining notions of difference is often met with apprehension and discomfort.

At her first solo show titled *Turf War* at PLATFORM: Center for Photographic and Digital Arts in Winnipeg, Mehra exhibited *I am the American Dream (Still Just a Paki)* (2010) as a way to map the geopolitics of immigrant success in the form of a car (figure 4.9). Like a painting on the wall, Mehra hangs a blinged-out car frame of a 1987 Jaguar Vanden Plas. The bitter tone apparent in the contrast between image and text, between title and art object – a gold spray-painted car frame with blacked-out windows, eviscerated of its engine and tires – casts a dark cloud over fantasies of upward mobility. Mehra's do-it-yourself (DIY) paint job enacts a migratory aesthetic and ethic specifically inspired by a working class immigrant mentality – a survival mechanism, especially when funds are limited. Thus, her uneven and shoddy application is intentional; up close, dried paint drips are visible. Mehra elaborates further on her process:

My trophy has an amateur finish: poor taping job, missing sections, etc. In fact, the car frame's original blue is still visible underneath the gold on several body panels (i.e. the section under the carriage at the rear is

completely overlooked). Also, a heavy hand with the spray gun on certain panels has lead to drips and discoloration.<sup>298</sup>

Mehra's DIY, immigrant aesthetic subverts the readymade's symbolic luxury. She renders the iconic symbol useless by stripping it bare and painting over it.<sup>299</sup>

Furthermore, her decision to use a Jaguar car in particular is intentional. Historically associated with British leisure, class, and opulence, in 2008 the luxury brand was sold to Tata Motors, the multinational corporation with headquarters in Mumbai.<sup>300</sup> In reality, the company has been traded so many times, Jaguar more accurately symbolizes an unsustainable idea of luxury. What happens when the colonizer loses their upper hand? Or when the colonized acquires enough capital autonomy to salvage a British jewel in the industry? *Turf War* curator J.J. Kegan McFadden has similar inquiries:

What does it mean for India, a country whose history is rife with their wealth having been pilfered throughout colonial rule, to turn the table on the Empire and obtain something of their colonizers? What are the ramifications of removing a jewel from the crown of another country?<sup>301</sup>

Well, according to Mehra's treatment of the object alongside her image and text relations, one is "still just a Paki."

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<sup>298</sup> Divya Mehra, "Both Teams Cannot Win: Natasha Bissonauth Interviews Divya Mehra," *C Magazine* 108 (Winter, 2010): 23.

<sup>299</sup> Bissonauth, "Divya Mehra's Borderwork," in *Quit India*, ed. Mehra, Divya (Winnipeg: Platform Center for Photographic + Digital Arts, 2013), 36.

<sup>300</sup> In 2004, Tata Motors Ltd. was listed in the New York Stock Exchange, the first company from India's engineering sector. By 2009 revenue exceeded \$14 billion. For more on this, see: Ray Hutton, *Jewels In the Crown: How Tata of India Transformed Britain's Jaguar and Land Rover*. London: Elliott and Thompson Limited, 2013.

<sup>301</sup> J. J. Kegan McFadden, *Turf War* press release (Winnipeg: Platform Center for Photographic + Digital Arts, 2010).

Mehra's treatment of the car makes a statement about the desire for commercial goods and its associations with normative conceptions of success. Immigrant aspirations are often intimately tied to these connections; indeed, the appearance of accumulated wealth as an immigrant ethos runs deep. Yet, Mehra generates a dialog between object and title that magnifies the disenchantments of such neoliberal longings. Debunking the attempt to buy into "the dream," Mehra bluntly reminds her audience of the struggles of upward mobility and of passing as upwardly mobile as a person of color. In a way, the car's gaudiness is an over-compensatory, makeshift, and facetious trophy for "making it." Therefore, and more accurately, Mehra's work interrogates what it might really mean to "make it," hanging less like a painting on the wall and more like an ironic plaque. Mehra is not entirely defeatist in her cynicism, however. The title-section, "*Still Just a Paki*," deliberately reclaims derogatory language for its empowering potential. Recalling Black British artist Rasheed Araeen and his live performance from the late 1970s, which I discuss in chapter one, Mehra permeates the pejorative term with a playfulness that, unlike Araeen who is invested in recognizing and affirming abjecthood, gestures towards defusing it.

Mehra's work engages a bold and dark playfulness around commodities that she transforms to emblemize difference. In this way, her work stands against major global contemporary artists like Subodh Gupta whose art commodities play into market demands. Gupta's stainless steel sculptures of buckets and various kitchenware for example signify his "Indianness" as an easily digestible and reproducible sound bite. By contrast, Mehra's car is not so easily packaged as an "ethnic stereotype," given how her playful aesthetic implicates her viewership's whiteness. Her sarcastic and bitter tone is

key to the dissonant effect of her transformed car, a tone that unsettles her audiences. As a result, the reception of her work has struggled to fully capture the point of her disquieting angle.

For instance, art critic Leah Sandals describes Mehra's art objects as "difficult," "touchy," and "opaque"<sup>302</sup> without delving deeper into the artist's intentions around intentionally inciting such resistance through discomfort. Sandals describes the issues that come up in the work as "personal" rather than structural and she often uses the passive voice when discussing the social inequities and injustices at play in Mehra's works. Yaniya Lee takes Sandals to task in her follow-up review, observing how her chosen language imbues Mehra's work with an unwarranted mysteriousness and incomprehensibility that absolves the critic of in-depth ethical involvement. Furthermore, Lee notes that "[t]he exalted critic's uncomfortable attitude is complicit with the myth of national identity."<sup>303</sup> Lee's review explains how Mehra's artworks frequently provoke a critical reception that betrays the reception's discomfort around writing about race relations and discord. Mehra's blunt manner is unsettling because her intention is ultimately antagonistic, especially in the way her work mocks her audience. In her words, "I'm hoping they see the work and think 'Hahaha that's so funny!'" and then something like the thought, "OMFG WHAT AM I LAUGHING AT" happens."<sup>304</sup> In this way, Mehra's works function like a slap in the face, and leaves a bitter aftertaste.

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<sup>302</sup> Leah Sandals, "Divya Mehra Troubles Stereotypes in Toronto," *Canadian Art* (March 24, 2014). <http://canadianart.ca/reviews/divya-mehra-georgia-scherman/>

<sup>303</sup> Yaniya Lee, "Anxious Territory: The Politics of Neutral Citizenship in Canadian Art Criticism," *C Magazine* 128 (Winter 2016), <http://cmagazine.com/issues/128/anxious-territory-the-politics-of-neutral-citizenship-in-canada>

<sup>304</sup> Samuel Jablon, "Divya Mehra's Tragicomedy of Failure" October 3, 2013,

The car only exhibited on one occasion and has since been kept in storage. Mehra checked up on it once and noticed that its tarp was missing. Exposed to the elements for over six years, withstanding the harsh winters of the Canadian Prairies, the car's DIY, hand-sprayed gold paint job has significantly deteriorated. This surface damage has impacted the object's meaning. Mehra describes the car as "going through an extended mask and transformation"<sup>305</sup> and while the artwork's initially intended aesthetic has been compromised, Mehra is now curious about how, as the car continues to morph, its meaning is implicated. And, as it seems, the evolution of the car's materiality poignantly illuminates the even darker undertones to play.

When Mehra thinks of what has become of the car's materiality, its rusty, decaying afterlife evokes chagrin for her; the car has lost its humor and sarcastic tenor. Since her father's premature death two years ago, Mehra's work in general has arguably forsaken some of its initial bite. For now, and in many ways, the car reminds Mehra of her dad, and by extension the not-so-uncommon immigrant story his shortened life narrated. Thinking through the life of the commodity, the car's metamorphosis symbolizes how progress is not by any means linear. Despite pursuing the American dream (in Canada no less), and despite efforts to "make it," her father ultimately died before his time in large part because of poor health accelerated by excessive drinking; this immigrant story of a small business owner is not uncommon. More than an empty cavity, the car is now a rotting frame, and as such, an apt metaphor – since in many ways

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<https://hyperallergic.com/86506/divya-mehras-tragicomedy-of-failure/>

<sup>305</sup> Mehra. personal interview, February 24, 2017.



the price for “making it” may very well amount to gradual internal disintegration.<sup>306</sup>

Mehra’s car animates what Lauren Berlant terms the cruel optimism of the “good life fantasy.”<sup>307</sup> Berlant argues that pursuing the good life – the notion that a good work ethic will lead to financial stability and upward mobility – is naive, because just below the surface of these attachments is the “steady hum of [impending] crisis.”<sup>308</sup> Precarity is thus a constant, haunting presence. And yet despite the proximity of precarity, the good life fantasy continues to bind people – herein lies the cruelty of what Berlant describes as optimistic pursuits.<sup>309</sup>

Thinking through how the art commodity can challenge neoliberal multiculturalism, consider what happens when a commodity turns into art. Its inherent transience is masked. The soup can is meant to be used – that is after all its use-value. However when Andy Warhol turned it into art, he manipulated the object’s temporality and transformed it into a timeless work of art. By contrast, Mehra’s car has been offered the chance to live out the life of the commodity, begging the question, how does meaning shift in the meantime? The joke is over, and the sad, melancholic, rotting truth of the statement “still just a Paki” shines through, no longer a laughing matter, no longer even sarcastic. Indeed, Mehra’s darkness is essential to her treatment of art commodities and an integral part of how her readymades gesture towards undermining the forces of neoliberal multiculturalism, which confine difference rather than complicate its impact. A work like Mehra’s car – from its blinged-out surface and its image and text relations to its morbid afterlife – delivers a deeper discomfort, as yet unpackageable.

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<sup>306</sup> Ibid.

<sup>307</sup> Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 194.

<sup>308</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>309</sup> Ibid., 200.

The rotting afterlife of Mehra's car is reminiscent of another work in her 2012 solo show, *The Party is Over*, at Artspeak in Vancouver: the stench that would become *There's just not enough to go around*, 2011, a fruit and custard cake with the map of Kashmir encrusted in the icing (figure 4.10). Throughout the duration of the show, the cake is exhibited in the space and as its ingredients gradually rot, the object emits a pungent smell that fills the room. At the same time, the icing morphs into what appears more like a blitzed map (figure 4.11). This rotting process spills over onto the colonial table on which the cake rests and degrades the luxury item. The multi-sensorial disgust conjures the foul stagnancy of the conflict in the region, a historically disputed territory between India and Pakistan with a highly militarized border. The cake's harsh odor animates the solo show's main impetus.<sup>310</sup>

Various works in *The Party is Over* embody the limits of postcolonial imaginations alongside the spectacle of modern progress, and Mehra turns to the commodity and readymade to anti-memorialize partition<sup>311</sup> – India and Pakistan's independence from Great Britain in 1947, which displaced roughly fifteen million people and resulted in three million dead on either side of the Radcliffe Line.<sup>312</sup> As anti-memorializations, Mehra's art objects achieve a critical remembrance that marks the failures of independence. This chapter's final example, *Here's to Us (Who Wore it Best?)* (2011), comprises two wristwatches made out of fake gold and silver, respectively (figure 4.12). Purchasing Chinatown knock-off Rolexes was alluring to Mehra because of the

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<sup>310</sup> Bissonauth, "Divya Mehra's Borderwork," 30–45.

<sup>311</sup> Partition does not only refer to 1947 but also encompasses the succession of Bangladesh in 1971. Moreover, aftermath "events" like the destruction of the Babri Mosque in 1992, the Gujarat pogroms in 2002. The Bombay attacks in 2008 have also been historiographically understood as residual and unresolved effects of 1947.

<sup>312</sup> The Radcliffe Line is the geographical boundary that partitioned Pakistan from India in 1947.

feelings of instant gratification that buying something beautiful provokes. And yet, upon closer inspection the cheap quality of the watches is quite apparent. She set the gold watch to Indian Standard Time and the silver watch to Pakistani Standard Time, half an hour behind. After partition, the two nations decided to occupy different time zones; Mehra's readymades convey how they choose to mark their animosity towards one another on multiple scalar levels. India and Pakistan's warring relationship is further evidenced by the watches' positioning within the space. The watches do not hang together; rather, as part of their installation one is located by the gallery entrance, whereas the other is placed on another wall at the opposite end of the room by the emergency exit. In this way, Mehra's installation of commodities suffuses the physical space of the gallery with postcolonial tensions.

And finally, in line with Mehra's attention to image and text relations, the artwork's title also undermines these deep historical tensions by asking "who wore *independence* best?" At the stroke of midnight on 15 August 1947, the two nations gained independence from the British, first India, then Pakistan. As two postcolonial countries negotiated their independence from what was initially a one-state plan, independence would come to be understood as a dividing line – and one of the bloodiest in history at that. Thus, from the moment of independence, their partition from one another has dominated border relations. Since their inception, the two nations have been competing with one another on the global stage vis-à-vis "who wore independence best"; running the risk of flippantly interpreting the open wound of the Indo-Pak conflict, Mehra's aesthetic choices are controversial. She borrows language from the American tabloid magazine *US Weekly*, whose section "*Who Wore it Best*" superficially assesses

two celebrities wearing the same outfit. Mehra deploys the popular tabloid reference to call out the pettiness of two countries who superficially parade pride in independence yet cannot even share a time zone with their neighbor.

Alongside their knock-off quality, which succeeds in performing more value than their actual worth, the watches function as art commodities that fail at packaging a digestible form of difference, Mehra's watches take on the controversial task of conspicuously calling out conflict *within* South Asia – specifically, the failing performance of postcolonial nationalisms. Like the blinged-out, rusty car and rotting cake, Mehra carefully selects objects and manipulates them in order to highlight their degrading value, a process that she accompanies with her own sardonic laugh. Alongside her clever image-and-text relations, her aesthetic treatment of these physical objects demonstrates how contemporary artists can indeed mobilize the commodity against the forces of neoliberal multiculturalism.

### Conclusion

There is dissonance in Mehra's confluence of comedy and tragedy, but there is also dialog. I begin and end this dissertation with the work of Mehra, bookends to my project that demonstrate the tonal range of playfulness: the lightness and darkness of play, the seriousness of play, the offensiveness of play. Her work boldly suspends her audiences somewhere in between laughter and outrage, and often leaves them undone. Call it an insult, a bad joke, or a teaching moment, her deadpan humor demands more accountability and less complicity from viewers. Mehra certainly asks quite a bit of her

audience because rather than cut the tension that her works address, she magnifies its effects and refuses to make sense of it.

In this last chapter, which assesses the currency and limits of play in contemporary emerging art from the South Asian diaspora, *Foe*'s intertextuality and failure nuances the visual culture of difference beyond representations of diasporic hybridity. In previous chapters, my case studies on Sunil Gupta and Chitra Ganesh illuminate the political potential of such aesthetic strategies, and there is formal kinship between their approaches and that of Fernandes. Gupta's *Sun City* deploys intertextuality to converse with the tradition of orientalist painting as well as gay male photographic erotica. Ultimately his photographic series exposes the racial codedness of queer representation through camp over-performance. In *Tales of Amnesia*, Ganesh's intertextuality re-activates an archive of well-known comics, *Amar Chitra Katha*, to expose the hetero-patriarchy of nationalist narratives in postcolonial South Asia and its diaspora. As a strategy grounded in highlighting difference at the heart of similarity, parodic intertextuality undoes the discursive formations undergirding codes and conventional narratives, thereby engendering openings rife with upending potential. *Foe* also deploys an aesthetics of failure that, by refusing to present an image of a "successful" diasporic subject, challenges the neoliberal multiculturalism of the art establishment.

In addition to failure, I suggest the art commodity as an apt aesthetic strategy that, in its inherent spectacularity, has the capacity to undermine the very conditions of its production. And yet, Fernandes' treatment of the African masks gives me pause. While taking the social life of the commodity as the subject of his art charts intriguing political

trajectories of the object's circulation, he curiously evades his own personal, cultural, and historical orbit around an object like the African mask; and as a Kenyan of South Asian descent, that orbit's complicity in settler colonialism must be unpacked. Ultimately, this chapter inquires into whether the art commodity can be mobilized to challenge neoliberal multiculturalism. In the age of global contemporary art, the risk of catering to market demands seems unavoidable. Yet certain aesthetic strategies gesture towards undermining these forces. Rather than mobilizing commodities of difference and perpetuating the very dynamics and relationships that her artworks aim to contest, Mehra manipulates commodities in a way that resists a packageable form of difference. Instead, she offers something more uncomfortable that degrades the value of the commodity. With her car frame, Mehra's dissonant effect between art object and title embodies the immigrant draw to the American dream – especially from the (mythic) model minority perspective – in a way that bluntly discloses the ruses of multicultural inclusionism in North America. In a similar vein, she manipulates a rotting fruitcake and fake Rolex watches into sobering commentaries on failed postcolonial posturings. Ultimately, the unsettling effect her commodities conjure refuses to play into the hands of neoliberal multiculturalism by engaging a more affective sense of value.

From community to commodity, simply striving to tell our own stories from our own perspectives, perspectives that have been historically spoken for, no longer seems sufficient. Despite struggling for recognition in the art world, these efforts have the capacity to be co-opted by the global market given the commodifying allure of difference. In fact, some scholars like Stallabrass maintain that these openings in the art world may only have emerged precisely *because* they could be absorbed. I would like to

think though that an aesthetic strategy like play can gesture towards undermining such forces and offer a way out.

## IMAGES

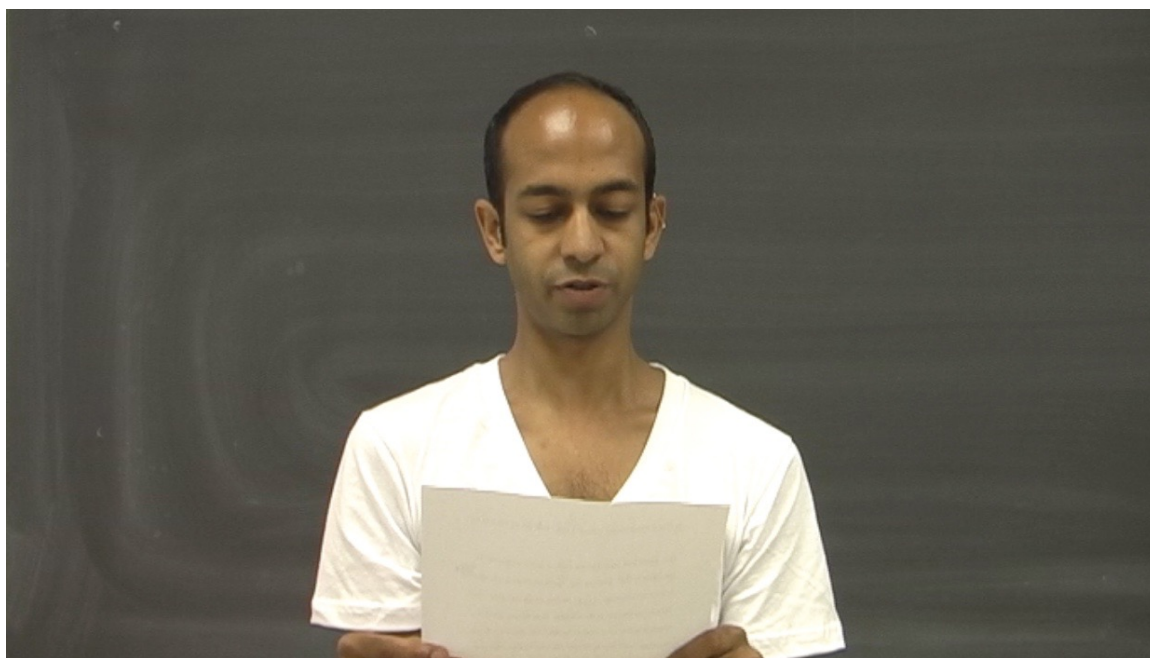


Figure 4.1  
Brendan Fernandes. *Foe*, 2008. 4 minute video installation.

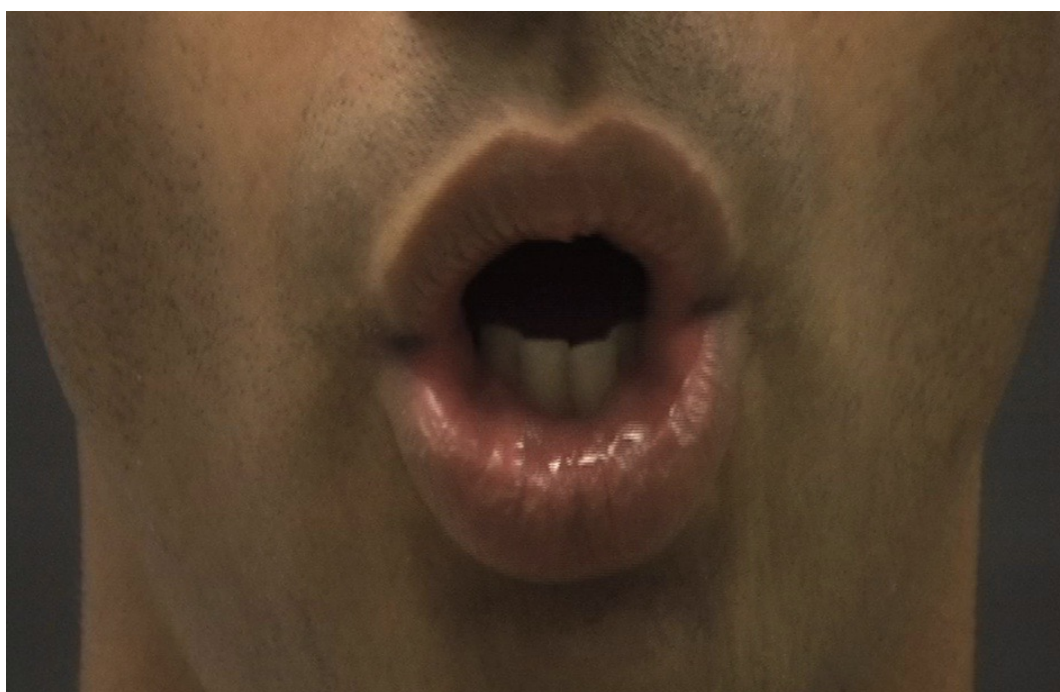


Figure 4.2  
Brendan Fernandes. *Foe*, 2008. 4 minute video installation.



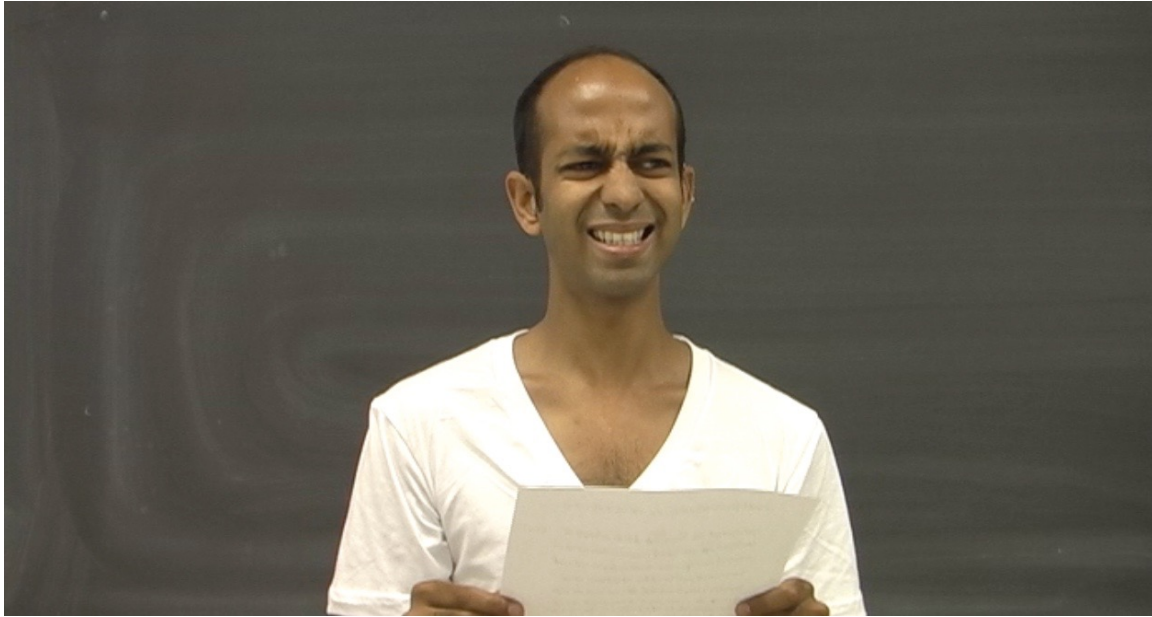


Figure 4.3  
Brendan Fernandes. *Foe*, 2008. 4 minute video installation.

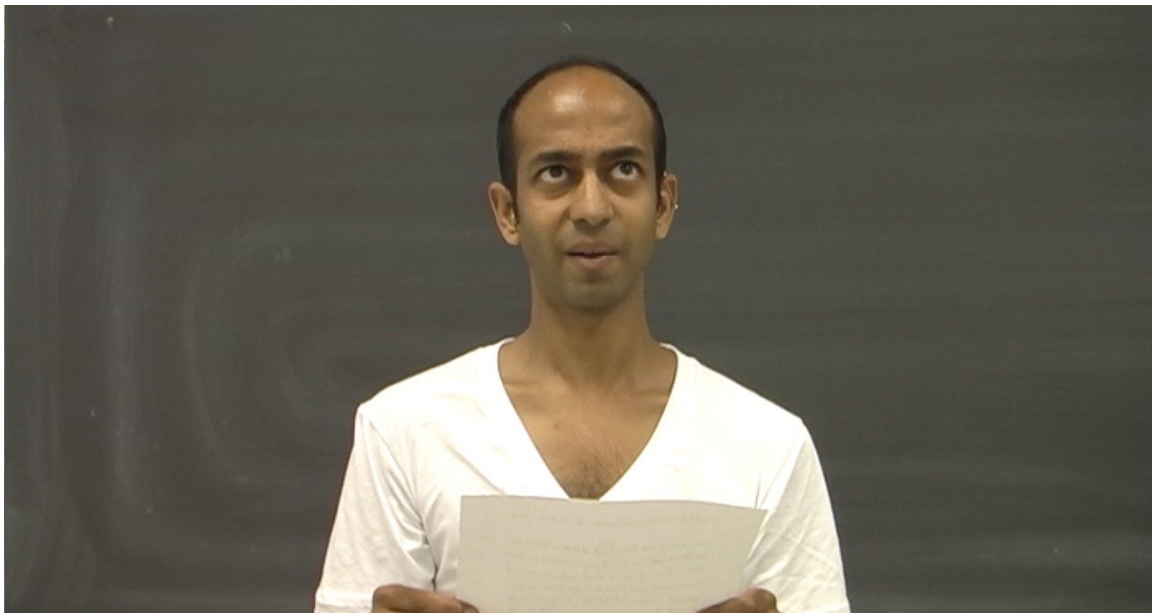


Figure 4.4  
Brendan Fernandes. *Foe*, 2008. 4 minute video installation.

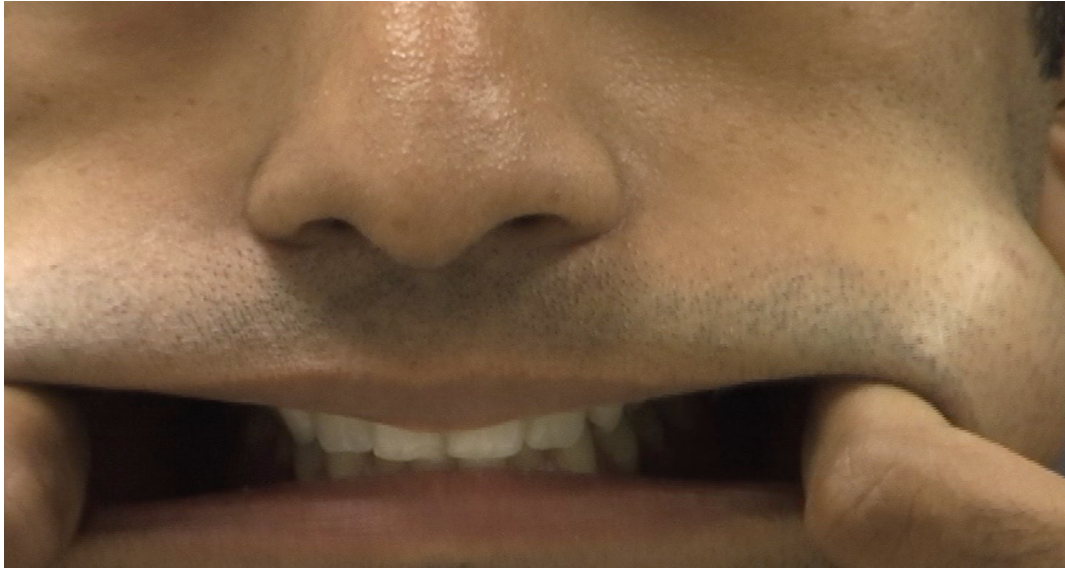


Figure 4.5  
Brendan Fernandes. *Foe*, 2008. 4 minute video installation.



Figure 4.6  
Brendan Fernandes. *Primitivism II*, 2007. Installation: plastic deer decoys; white resin replicas of Masai masks; green painted walls.



Figure 4.7  
Brendan Fernandes. *From Hiz Hands*, 2010. Installation: neon lights, wall text.



Figure 4.8  
Divya Mehra. *Third Eye*, 2004. Digital photographs.





Figure 4.9  
Divya Mehra. *I am the American Dream (Still Just a Paki)*, 2010. Jaguar car frame (1987); gold spray-paint.



Figure 4.10  
Divya Mehra. *There's Just not Enough to Go Around*, 2011. White cake with fruit, custard filling and whipped topping; mahogany British parlor table, c. 1890.



Figure 4.11

Divya Mehra. *There's Just not Enough to Go Around*, 2011. White cake with fruit, custard filling and whipped topping; mahogany British parlor table, c. 1890.



Figure 4.12

Divya Mehra. *Here's to US (Who Wore it Best)?*, 2011. Fake gold watch; fake silver watch.

## CONCLUSION

### Sari not Sorry

When Kareem Khubchandani was completing his Ph.D. at Northwestern, he helped organize gay Bollywood parties in Chicago and one fundraiser required a drag queen performance. He searched for local talent but to no avail; deciding to take on the task himself LaWhore Vagistan was thus born. Within a context (both heteronormative and queer) of extreme exoticization of brown bodies, Vagistan's performances resonate with her South Asian audience as an interpellative moment. Vagistan has performed for audiences that are not predominantly South Asian as well, joining the college and university circuit; she has also made a music video. Although she first emerged out of a sense of need, Vagistan has since become a theoretical performative for dance studies scholar, Khubchandani, more precisely, a form of South Asian drag that embodies race and representation in the United States.<sup>313</sup> For example, when Vagistan elaborates on the etymology of her full name, she provides a flirty and playful interpretation of South Asian politics across geographic borders – a position that aligns with a queer diasporic analytic (chapter two and three). In an interview, she explains her origins in more depth:

I chose “LaWhore” because my family traces origins to Pakistan: Lahore is an important city in Pakistan, and well, I’m a bit of a whore. And [I chose] Vagistan because I see the subcontinent as one, big, beautiful Vag...istan. [...] India is the uterus-vagina, Pakistan and Bangladesh are

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<sup>313</sup> Khubchandani is currently working on his first book, *Ishtyle: Accenting Gay Indian Nightlife*, on gay nightlife in India and the South Asian diaspora.

the ovaries, Afghanistan, Nepal, Burma, and Bhutan are the fallopian tubes, and Sri Lanka is the little floating labia.<sup>314</sup>

Note how the tone of this explication caters to an audience unfamiliar with South Asian geopolitics. Despite a vibrant subculture of Bollywood drag in North America, there is “minimal documentation”<sup>315</sup> of its practice. For example, *Rupaul’s Drag Race* has yet to feature a South Asian contestant, and “mainstream gay bars [in the US] don’t know what to do with drag when it’s not in English.”<sup>316</sup>

Historically, bars have served as safe spaces for queer communities, open to various forms of pleasure and hailing a sense of collectivity. However, they have felt exclusionary for queer people of color; concrete examples include marketing and song list decisions that cater to a white, masculine aesthetic.<sup>317</sup> Moreover, with regards to performances in the clubs, “comedy queens [are] especially prone to racist performances”<sup>318</sup> that rely on stereotypical representations of racialized others for entertainment value. Although it might seem dangerous to point out racial bias in queer communities when communal spaces are under constant surveillance and threat of erasure, nevertheless, these spaces are structured around certain hierarchies and monolithic visions of community are misleading.<sup>319</sup> In this way, Vagistan’s performances across the US function as a critical reformatting, an embodied form of irreverence that

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<sup>314</sup> Kareem Khubchandani, “Lessons in Drag: An Interview with LaWhore Vagistan,” *Theatre Topics* 25, no. 3 (2015), 286.

<sup>315</sup> 288.

<sup>316</sup> 288.

<sup>317</sup> Christina B. Hanhardt, *Safe Space: Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013)

<sup>318</sup> Khubchandani, “Lessons on Drag,” 289.

<sup>319</sup> Ibid.

opens up the racial dynamics of drag, especially her Bollywood inspired numbers which incorporate gestures largely unfamiliar to an American audience.

Interestingly, once a semester Khubchandani introduces Vagistan as a guest lecturer to his classrooms; she not only performs for his students but teaches them lessons on drag. “[C]hoos[ing] songs in conversation with [assigned] texts,”<sup>320</sup> for example, Vagistan’s drag crosses over from the realm of entertainment and function as carefully rendered teaching tools. In an interview, Khubchandani and Vagistan discuss how the students distinguish his pedagogy from hers and how the class dynamics shift given her flamboyantly camp and irreverent attitude. To quote Vagistan, “I make them tell me what they understood from the readings, and I ask them to break it down methodically and into clear language that ‘even a dumb drag queen can understand.’”<sup>321</sup> Bearing this in mind, how might Vagistan’s first and only music video thus far, *Sari* (2017)<sup>322</sup>, function as a teaching tool around the irreverence of play at the heart of the visual culture of difference?

A parody of *Sorry*, Justin Bieber’s hit single from his fourth album *Purpose* (2015), Vagistan’s revised lyrics to *Sari* offer a sense of Vagistan’s playful redo and intervention:

I don’t want to look like all of the other drag queens.

Leggings for days and dresses for miles and gowns for weeks.

Chanel and Dior and Louis Vuitton, Versace.

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<sup>320</sup> Ibid., 288.

<sup>321</sup> Ibid.

<sup>322</sup> *Sari* by Vagistan is available to view on youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Op-aSfh6sxQ>



‘Cuz I looked best when I’m dressed like an aunty.

Don’t I look great in this sari?

Cuz I’m giving you this sexy body.

(too sexy, yaar!)

Don’t I look great in this sari?

I know right now I look so fly, when I rock my desi style.

(that is looking like a 100 rupees “sari”)

(this is such a last season)

(learn to walk properly in that “sari”)

I know right now I look so fly, when I rock my desi style.

They tell me I’m hairy, you should invest in some Nair but I say no.

Your skin is too dark and you need a highlighter, more contour.

You know I’ll only leave, will be met when you call me curry scented ho.

Cuz I’m not stressed, hastag blessed, namaslay bitch.

You don’t want to mess with this aunty.

Cuz she’ll put that salt in your chai tea.

(the pleats are uneven on your “sari”)

(you need to nicely pin your “sari”)

(where can I also buy that “sari”)

(you look like Priyanka Chopra in that “sari”)

(you’ll find your life partner in that “sari”)

Unlike Bieber’s lyrics, Vagistan is unapologetic; refusing to adhere to the conventions of drag, especially those that prioritize glam and grooming, she instead establishes her ease

and pride in being “dressed like an aunty.” Immediately after the opening scene, Vagistan appears from behind a shower curtain wearing nothing but a towel around her torso – her hairy cleavage in full view. As she puts the final touches to her make-up and fills her bra with silicon chicken cutlets, the labor that goes into her transformation – in becoming “aunty” – is made evident. This redress departs from negative connotations that the adjective, aunty, generally carries, connotations that refer to being out of step with coolness or the latest fashion. However, Vagistan remakes “aunty” into an irreverent, defiant diva. This irreverent defiance includes highlighting her mischief such as threats of putting “salt in your chai tea.” The phrase, chai tea, also figures as an underhanded jab to the majoritarian public who do not understand that “chai” is Hindi/Urdu for tea, making “chai tea” a terribly redundant phrase. Other phrases such as “curry scented ho” and “namaslay” turn orientalized stereotypes of South Asians on their heads. Vagistan’s disidentificatory interpellation with them defuses their hurtful force.

Although Vagistan is the main star of *Sari*, Aunty Kool Jams makes several appearances and her brief interjections during the chorus offer an illuminating point of contrast. Her parenthetical lyrics like, “learn to walk properly in that sari,” “the pleats are uneven on your sari,” and “you need to nicely pin your sari,” represent the voice of convention, exemplifying the protocol and decorum involved in wearing saris. Moreover, in the way she points her finger at the camera and gazes sternly from atop her spectacles, her authoritative demeanor suggests that anything else would be “junglee” (chapter three). Thus, Vagistan’s relationship to the sari, which re-imagines “aunty” as cool, functions to undermine Aunty Kool Jams’ relationship to the sari, which speaks to the regulatory nature of respectability politics in dress. Her final contribution to the song,

“you’ll find your life partner in that sari” betrays the teleological purpose of such regulatory logic. Yet, finding a man is hardly part of Vagistan’s sartorial calculus. Thus, the two aunties’ diverging perspectives do not ever align in the video. What is the impact of embedding in *Sari* the very ideology from which Vagistan disidentifies? Ultimately, Vagistan’s is unapologetic in her disposition and it is this playful irreverence that undoes the disciplinary forces that Auntie Kool Jams represents. Their juxtaposition demonstrates how one cannot simply counter hostile oppositions but must in fact engage with them in order to reformat and gesture towards subverting them.

While this dissertation focuses on artists and their reception in the art world, I end with *Sari* to demonstrate how my call for a theory of play at the heart of the visual culture of difference finds kinship with visual and performative texts outside the purview of the established art world. Gayatri Gopinath’s definition of public cultures is useful here: “cultural forms and practices that are at the margins of what are considered legitimate sites of resistance or the ‘proper objects’ of scholarly inquiry.”<sup>323</sup> In *Impossible Desires* Gopinath examines queer diasporic archives that function as reserves of counter-memories; against the hetero-patriarchy of ethnic and nationalist narratives that overshadow South Asian diasporas “while simultaneously resisting Euro-American, homonormative models of sexual alterity,”<sup>324</sup> her approach to these subversive archives imagine other ways of being in the world. In this way, Vagistan’s performances ally with works like Chitra Ganesh’s *Tales of Amnesia* and Sunil Gupta’s *Sun City* as irreverent re-stagings of sexual possibility within the diaspora. Thus a theory of play at the heart of the visual culture of difference will not only challenge inclusionist projects to be more self-

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<sup>323</sup> Gayatri Gopinath. *Impossible Desires*: (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 20.

<sup>324</sup> Ibid.

reflective of its neoliberal multiculturalism, but will gesture towards overturning the parameters of what constitutes aesthetic taste and decorum.

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